SIGNET

2013

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Dear Readers,

Maybe my opinion is biased, but this year's magazine is something I am extremely proud of. If you are featured in this magazine, on the staff, or just checking us out, know that the Queens art community is flourishing into a beautiful thing. I'm so happy we could provide an outlet for all types of creative expression, including lyrics, premiering this year.

Thank you to my staff, who impress me every day with their ambition and ingenuity. Thank you to Professor Renfroe, who allows us to dictate our own creative process while still gracefully advising us towards professionalism. Thank you, finally, to the readers, who see and love the fruits of our labor: this is for you.

Love and respect always,

Bree Stallings
Senior Editor

It is my upmost hope that you enjoy this year's *Signet* and find something that sparks your own creativity. Maybe it's a photo or poem, a prose piece or work of art. I'd like to think all of us have an inner artist or writer in us somewhere that's just waiting to be inspired. I would not even be at Queens had I not seen a copy of the magazine and heard raving reviews from a former staff member, peaking my interest in transferring schools and biding my time until I could become a part of *Signet*. This year's staff has worked tremendously hard to piece together this incredible publication and I am so proud to be a member of such a passionate and creative team.

To all the submitters out there: thank you for your time, effort, and most importantly your creations, which are all vital to the production of *Signet*. To those who didn't submit, you have a whole year to prepare for submitting to the *Signet* Spring 2014 edition.

Get reading, get inspired, and get going on your contribution!

Yours,

Emma Rainear
Junior Editor

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Chris Sherfinski

Interview with Dr. Eric Mullis

Biography

Eric Mullis is Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Queens University and also Music Director for The Triptych Collective. He performed with the West-African dance ensemble Djoliba Don from 2002-2004 and is the founding member of the Charlotte-based jazz-fusion quintent Actual Proof. He received a PhD. in Philosophy from the University of South Carolina in 2005 and has published essays on Performance Theory and Philosophy of the Body in The Journal of Aesthetic Education and Dance Research Journal.

Dr. Mullis spent more than a half hour talking with me about his interest and involvement in performance art. During this time he told stories about his JBIB students, learning to play drums, marimba and then vibraphone, then about taking up songwriting on the electric xylophone and how excited he gets at the expressive possibilities he's discovered in the synthetic instrument. He also highlighted that he feels his view of philosophy and art compliments Queens University's recent push to get our students more involved in the local community. Here's what he had to say about the intersection of philosophy and art.

Q: How do your professor role and artist role interact with one another?

A: For a long time they had nothing to do with each other. Over the last two, or three years they've started interacting a lot more, and that's exciting.

Traditionally with philosophy you get your ideas out there by writing. You write papers, you write books, you write papers that become books, and then you may speak somewhere – that's kind of rare though. So, the cool thing about The Triptych Collective is that it gave me someplace to use performance to play with those ideas. It's another way of expressing those problems other than a paper.

Q: One of the videos on your Web site shows dancers dancing on either side of a glass wall. What were you exploring and showing with that?

A: We were thinking about social media as a performance space where people perform a version of themselves. Sometimes people are pretty literal about who they are, and even if people aren't making stuff up, they are being selective about what they want to show. We had been talking a lot about that, Facebook and Twitter, as performance space. On the one hand, they make us feel like we are in constant contact with each other, but at the same time, we are less connected because this very complex digital platform is actually between us.

So, that was this intricate choreography piece and yet there are these windows dividing the people. You couldn't see it, but there were maybe 50-75 people just watching, so there was also this split between the dancers who were inside, and the dancers who were outside, and yet they were doing the same things for the audience.

Q: Dance has come up a couple of times, are you a dancer?

A: I wouldn't say a dancer. I have a martial arts background, I've been doing it since I started college, and there's a performance aspect to martial arts that's like dance. I've always enjoyed seeing dance, and working with dance now, I think that I would say I'm a mover, but not a dancer because I don't have all the training they have. I see them do so much stuff that amazes me that I could never do. So, I wouldn't say I'm a dancer, I'm a mover.

Q: How has working at Queens effected your work with The Triptych Collective?

A: A really nice thing I've noticed is that a lot of students are interested. I hope that continues. In some sense it's self serving, if people come to a show it's really awesome because it helps make a better show by having more people. When it was just my band I would feel really strange because I loved it when the students came, but its your band, playing at a bar. But with the Collective it's different because it's really performance art. I feel like whenever anyone comes they're probably experiencing something unlike anything they've seen before. Everybody has seen plays, a lot of people have seen dance theater, but probably haven't seen something like what the Collective does. I'm very happy that students have come and I hope that more and more will come.

Q: How can students keep up with your artistic work if they are interested?

A: I think probably the best thing, and this is ironic given the Facebook discussion earlier, of course we have our website [www.triptychcollective.com] which I update regularly, but the thing that's always going is Facebook. We've got facebook.com/triptychcollective and that's probably the best way to keep an eye on what we're doing. That's been our most effective way to reach people. I do put posters around campus too if we have a big show coming up, but posters are posters, and some people look at them, some people don't, and there are just so many of them.

Darcy Russel

Spotlight: Dr. Kara Wooten and Professor Gerald Colbert

Meet Kara and Jerry, who, with their students, craft wonderful and often intricate sets, direct fantastic shows, and create new worlds for the community to watch and enjoy. With extensive professional background, both Kara and Jerry bring unique skills to Queen's theatre program.

One of two female fight masters in the world at the moment, Kara Wooten is a top-tier fight-choreographer and performer. Her stage combat class gives students the opportunity to become certified stage combatants, a rare opportunity for college students. Along with an extensive fight background, she also has strong academic credentials with a Ph.D. in acting and directing from Texas Tech. The doctoral program required students to take courses in music, art and theatre, which is why she chose

the interdisciplinary program. She believes that Theatre is where all the arts meet and strives to bring all artistic disciplines into each show. Kara's return to Queens as her place of work is no accident, having studied the craft as an undergrad here. "Queens gave me my love of theatre to begin with, and I want to pass that on to as many people as possible," she explains. "If you can do theatre, you can succeed in anything. You can't be dumb."

"You can't be a good actor if you're stupid," agrees Jerry Colbert. " I want to ruin young lives with a love of theatre." Jerry has worked at Queens officially for two years, but logged several years previously as an adjunct professor. He has a Bachelor of Fine Arts from the University of North Carolina and has forty years of professional experience as actor, director, technician, choreographer, producer, and singer. From stage, screen, television, and even backyards, he brings a perspective of theatre and film as it is performed in the real world, not just in colleges. Jerry originally came to Queens as a guest artist in a musical production and later his company was hired to design a set for Queens' theatre program. He and Kara tag team the directing duties from show to show. Along with the several acting classes he teaches, including acting for film, Jerry does most of the shop work, giving students valuable hands-on experience building sets.

Both Kara and Jerry have such wide variety in their experience in theatre that they are a bit of generalists. That means they are able to succeed in most any job they are called to do here, and they teach that generalist nature to the students that involve themselves in theatre. They also both firmly believe that instilling a sense of professionalism is tantamount. You'll rarely see a theatre kid being less than ten minutes to a rehearsal and if you swing by the Hadley theatre, chances are you'll see someone working--either rehearsing, building, or dealing with costumes, just to name a few.

According to Kara, "theatre mirrors life, so any skill that people have, there is a use for in theatre. Be it marketing, business, sewing, interviewing, sales, commissions, performance, design, electrician, construction. It involves everything. Depending on the show, it's a deep exploration into any field." Jerry added on with, "We're called upon to wear many shoes, wear many hats. It's a challenge, but it's also fun. In some respects, being here forces you to return to the basics that got you involved in the first place. "

One thing they both agree that everyone should know is just how much work the students put into the theatre program. An average show is about 8 week, with at least 20 hours a week spent working, so the average production spends a minimum of 160 hours just in scheduled rehearsals, and that's

just for acting rehearsals. That's not counting the amount of work outside of rehearsals done, and the average time spent on tech is usually even a little longer than that. For example, the time I spent talking to them for this interview was spent yelling to be heard over the sound of saws. It is a lot of work, but they say that it's worth it--and I agree.

Theatre is important and we are incredibly lucky to have Jerry and Kara at this school. They're each incredibly well experienced and they make magic happen without the need for a Broadway budget. It is a lot of work, everyone in theatre spends days, if not weeks, without sleep. But we do it because we love it and we learn so much in our time here. We have to. Kara and Jerry are our mentors, but it is the students that really help to make theatre shine. We learn from them and from other students how to become make-up designers, costumers, set builders, light technicians--you name it, we've got it. We work and work and we get paid with the applause of others. So come and enjoy theatre, be it watching from the audience, stepping onto stage yourself, or losing a bit of sanity working behind the scenes.

POETRY

Saying Hello

Alli Rybak

Poetry Contest Winner:

An Open Poem to Queens Admissions Counselors

Mary Jasperse

Where are all the eligible men?
There's only nine, maybe ten.
Oh, wait—you may try to shout,
But athletes simply do not count!
They're all too fit and busy, too.
Plus, the sporty girls have formed a queue.
The frat boys are always in some meeting,
And I hear they're prone to cheating.
Guys in chapel are so pure.
Not all us girls are so demure.
That leaves us with a precious few—
7:3 is an unfair skew.
Maybe this is way too blunt,
But Diana is the goddess of the hunt.
None of the women are refuting
That y'all need to get your butts recruiting!

Alli Rybak

Duck, Duck

Dear Love,

Sometimes it seems like we are playing
A game of duck duck goose.
But, why is it always me that is chasing you?
I just want to stop, rewind, and sit back down.
I'll wait for my turn the next time around.

Sincerely,
Why can't I just be the damn duck?

Jeffrey Scott

Brandy

Inspired by "Brandy (You're a Fine Girl)" by Elliot Laurie

Your burnt orange waves cascade down
underneath your snowy veil.
Your oceanic eyes glisten
in the summer afternoon.
You don't blush going forward—why would you?
This is the best day of your life.

You're the fairest, Brandy. Make the vows,
and we, your dwarves, will handle all the rest.
That Charming man waits for you.
He sails the seas in your eyes,
and he's finally coming home.

Now the time has come to dance—
first, the Charming sailor, sailing the waves
of your pearly gown.
Then, the man of fading black,
father of the seas.
Last, we brotherly dwarves, who laugh and swing
and spin you 'round the checkerboard.

Now off you sail on your ship,
cans clattering, paint peeling,
to show the world your union.
His life, his lover, his lady—
Brandy, what a fine wife you'll be.

You're now a piece of the puzzle—
one small bite in the apple of life.
Thousands of pieces stroll ahead of you,
and millions of pieces race behind.
We all must solve the puzzle,
segment by segment, morsel by morsel,
and Brandy, you've brought us closer.

Elizabeth Westfield

A Wine Glass Filled with Juice

I curl into the curves
created by our entwining bodies.
Your heat leeches the chill creeping around my mind
while the spider in the corner nuzzles a gnat and I forget
that I am no longer a child being cuddled.
I feel the fingertips tracing around my neck
brand my skin, with the warmth from your side of the bed.
The memory of baking cookies wafts from my childhood and I remember
flashes of fights overheard: how late he got home
or who left the oven on while the children crawled,
lectures criticizing every choice,
speaking over time, about time: too slow, too fast, non-existent.
The echoed tick of the clock stops.
I hide my head under a blanket.
I can pretend now will never end,
that I won't wake up, that your arms will still hold me,
that the future won't come
again.

Amy Bareham

Into the Wind

Let her rest, our tender, yielding Beauty.
For she bears the weight of this earth's hunger upon her breast.
She was born a creature of innocence,
lovely in her divine purity,
perfect in countenance
and free from the bonds of adversity.
Captivated by soft spirits and grace,
She lingered on the petals of shy
roses, her blush on each face,
their every breath entwined with her low sigh.
And through worldly desire she came alive,
hints of her light touching darkened souls
until she no longer thrived.
Her sweet heart corrupt, the mourning bell tolls.
Encaged by human vanity, she died
her flame engulfed by sorrow and strife,
robbed of virtue, her pride—
she swiftly ran towards the end of life.
So bitter the taste
and painful the haste
with which we said goodbye.
Our vainglory the reason for her cry.
Let her rest, our tender, yielding Beauty,
for she bears the weight of this earth's hunger upon her breast.

Elizabeth Westfield

The World Still Turns

When time rolls over
belly up
will I still feel
the pin-needle pricks
that blossom under my finger
prints when they're pressed
against your photo
with the crack
from that fight we had
when you were alive
that seems to reach
farther towards your face
each moment I catch
a glimpse of the folds
of sun smothering
the final seconds
we had together
out from your eyes

Jordan Roberts

The Unfair Trade

The teeth of beasts do not frighten me;
nor does my return to the dust from which I rose. Yet I loathe
the four walls shaded in Midnight black; the moon
birthing shadows from its womb.
With my left ear, I hear the ivory, Egyptian cotton
rustle and envelop your disrobed body.
My right ear catches a sigh expel from my lips as
salted water bids farewell to my irises.
Fear steals my salt and sigh.
If I make love to you again,
I will be finished for all mankind.
I will give the pumping organ beneath my ribs
to your cherry oak toy chest.
In return, you will bestow a single gift;
the bodily component that gives God the right to call you a man.
To that I yield every bite on my nail-bed.
This unfair trade frightens me.

Elizabeth Heffner

Heirloom

My wooden bed frame shuddered and groaned
as it rocked in time
to our slick, intertwined bodies.

Almost a century of sexual antics
had been etched in the oak,
beginning in a quaint northern farmhouse
on my great-grandmother's wedding night.

My mother never would explain
the worn parallel trenches
dug across the headboard.

The headboard continued its
persistent knocking against
the lip of the window frame,
and I briefly wondered if
the neighbors would wake
from the cacophony
of creaks and moans.

He collapses in pleasure,
and I curl on my side,
anticipating his hand sliding
across my ribcage.

Jossette Footmon

Another Anthem

Kisses for barter, a relinquishing of lips
to the alcohol martyr's tongue,
grown increasingly irate
by beer seven or eight.
The buzz finally hit, widening the eyes
of the girl who wondered
if she'd remember this right;
indulging in the rapture of night
or better yet the purple kush blitz
that swarmed the silvery tip
of the piercing flitting out through her mouth.

Whispered words stumble into wastebaskets
that reign over forgotten Pinnacle bottles
and names. Promises of a phone call
as she stumbled away in the sloppy race
against sunrise. Blurred images gave chase,
followed by the faint recollection of the caress
of a bed, then the twinge, a tug of a head

assaulted by overblown senses
pulling a mind into its wake.
Nearby a radio alarm blasts
out Friday night anthems of quickies
with a girl, drink in her cup.
She's singing along, "I don't give a fuck."

Raleigh Green

Just Vibe

Don't think about words.
Let your soul unwind,
leave the stress behind
and put the music on play.
Today was hard, but the night
is right, and here we stay.
Feel the melody.
Get lost in this trance,
swaying back and forth as the smoke clouds dance
to their own rhythm.
Conformity is no object.
You feel your body whisper.
This call, that feel, don't stop it—
just move, but stay
the outside world, let it drift away.
This is your haven, your safe place, your home;
dwell in these confines to others that are unknown.
That beat, that beat—
feel it bass, feel it pop.
Hear how this life form never ceases or drops
away when you need it most.
Feel it swarm around you and hold you close.
Just vibe.

Jen Windland

On the Verge

Come drink margaritas on the beach with me
as the world falls apart around us.
The fires and the rubble in the background
and we are fed up with the bullshit.
Stronger and smarter, maybe.
Tepid and dumb, and maybe just
rebels against the destruction of the world.
Others can deal with the end of life as we know it.
Paradise waits for us over the sand and the wet
horizon, so just take a sip and listen to the chaos aria
evenly sounding over a world quite catastrophic.

Darcy Russel

Forget your Cons and your Quences

Let us twirl together until the stars burn
the soles of our feet; twirl until
we collapse in a tangle of limbs.
Let us find love in exhausted smiles
and coffee brightened eyes.
Let us rejoice
in our pockmarked skin and fear

of holding hands.
If only for a breath
forget about your Cons and your Quences
and let us both fall to our knees.

Dayana Donisca

Let Me Tell You Something

Your hands are soft.
Your feet aren't rough.
You don't even need to go to the nail salon.
"Five dalla, five dalla nails for you?" Oh no, no no,
because they are so soft,
your hands and your feet.
You wear the latest fashion;
skinny jeans, bandeaus.
"Long heels red bottoms, long heel red bottoms."
You're oh so hip,
and you really don't give a shit,
"Got my middle finger up, I don't really give a fu-"
Your daddy buys you whatever you want,
just toss him a list of everything you want,
"I want this, I want this, OOO and I really want this."
Everyday is Christmas in your world,
your mom does all the housework.
You never touch a dirty plate,
you have people to do that for you. (Nods heads towards nearest person,)
"Uh, excuse me, Miss, Miss, can you, uh, get this cleaned up?"
But,
let ME tell you something.
My hands are rough and callused from hard work.
"I've been working at the sweat sho-Macys all the livelong day"
My feet are rough and LAWD do they need healing.
When I head into a store, I head straight for the sales rack.
Ain't no need to look at anything full price.
"Twenty-what? How much for this T-Shirt?"
My back aches from standing so long all day.
"Damn I want to sit down, but I got to get this paper"
My daddy is dead.
He doesn't buy me whatever I want.
Instead, I buy ink to mark my skin just to remember him.

My mom works 2 jobs.
2, the government don't give her sh-
shh, shh, shh.
After a long day of work I head home (2 trains and a bus).
I begin to clean-mop the floors, wash the dishes, sweep, dust.
(Breathe out).

My only peace comes when I'm taking a bath.
A nice warm soapy bubble bath.
"Ahhh..."
I'll look at my hurt hands, my hurt feet, and think
at least I work hard for what I get.
I'm just fine with that.
So, go ahead with your Luis Vition bag (whatever they're called) and
act like you're the most IMPORTANT.
I don't care,
I ain't a hater.
I'm fine where I'm at.
Because let me tell you something,
I know the value of a dollar.
Everyday has the ideals of Thanksgiving,
I am thankful for all I have.
I work hard for mine.
My hands, my feet are used;
Worn, abused.
"Five dalla nails for you?"
I wish.
How about one dalla nails from Family Da-Dollar?
But,
at the end of the day I can truly say,
"The shoe on my feet, I've bought it.
The clothes I'm wearing, I've bought it.
The rock I'm rockin', I've bought it."
Miss, you are not "the shit".
I am.

Elizabeth Westfield

Ophelia

Is insanity imagined when it bleeds
up into my feet from the roots of these trees
that reach down to kiss
the surface of that seductive water
that beckons me with each slap against the shore?

It's that moment when petals fly
through my nostrils and mingle
with the sparks in my mind,
a tornado. I hear an aria
bounce from the tree tops
and I have to chase it,
when frisky flowers tug at my feet
to tie me down to this earth. So I pick
them to use against those
that threw insanity at me in the first place.

Or is it those times I see more
color in the world than I used to?
As if this world is just a rainbow trail
fallen, that was meant to lead to heaven.

Emma Rainear

Deutsches Gedicht: Der Wald

Ich ging im Wald
wo die wild Dingen sind,
ich werde ein Buch lessen
unter der großer Eichbaum.
Die Vögelen zirpen und
die Einhörnen flattern,
in eine grüne Abdeckhaube.
I höre die klangen zu
und seufzen einträchtig –
der Wald ist ruhig
ein perfekter Platz
zu sitzen und lesen.
Ich ging im Wald,
zu ein Buch lessen
und mein Harz ist zufrieden,
darunter die Ruhe und das Grün.

Emma Rainear

German Poem: The Forest

I went into the forest
where the wild things are.
I will read a book
under the tall oak tree.
The birds chirp
and the squirrels chatter,
in a green canopy.
I listen to the sounds
and sigh happily.
The forest is peaceful,
a perfect place
to sit and read.
I went into the forest
to read a book
and my heart is content,
under the peace and the green.

Alina Labrador

My Mom Calls Me "Americanita"

off-hand and laughing. She believes
the suffix band-aids her injury, that her verdicts
are gentler in diminutives.

She has always spoken in watered downs
adjectives, elongated words, as if increasing
their area lessened the impact:

my fat friend was *gordita*, my plain friend was *feita*
my not-white friend was never, ever *negra*,
just *negrita*.

Fatish, uglyish, blackish.

My sister and I, and mom, drive. Mom complains.
She tried to give us *patria*. Not just country, but *home-land*,
to root us in good soil, to never feel the kidnap of exile,

the fear of a father always chanting:
nos vamos, *nos vamos*
we leave, we leave.

My mom moans: despite her effort
now we are "americanitas."
So sure she failed. She doesn't ask:

How do you take your coffee?

(I drink it *cortado*: espresso, a dainty slip
of milk and sugar, like papi taught me,
and even in August, drunk hot hot.)

What'd you make for Thanksgiving dessert?

(*Flan*: tia always burnt the caramel
so I learned how not to. It was a delicate
creamy jiggle, and I devoured it.)

How do you feel about the Puerto Rican referendum on our status?

(Torn, terrified: Can we survive without
the gringo economy? Could we survive
the cultural rape of statehood?)

I think these things later. She drives,
and I and my sister sit while mom says
we turned out "americanitas"

and this is what I think: I'm not sure
what it means that I'm Puerto Rican
or Cuban or "americanita"

maybe it's only
my exhaled *te quiero*
behind the *I love you*
when we say goodbye.

Ally Rappe

The Glory Days

A typical Saturday afternoon outside:
the cool fall breeze,
markers squeaking.
A cardboard scent.
Baby brother waddling in his diaper,
my stomach full from Golden Corral.

There are purple, red, green
circles and lines and squares all around the box.
My brothers have squinted eyes,
heads wrinkled with concentration.

Stepping back, I admire our cardboard box
now turned into a rocket.
"What are you doing?" yells mommy and daddy.
I just smile, tasting the cherry chapstick on my lips.
All of us squish inside the box and chant,
"3…2…1…BLASTOFF!"

A laugh bursts out from everyone as we
float around the sun,
walk on top of the moon,
and see aliens on Mars:
now an extraordinary Saturday afternoon.

Jossette Footmon

Forgotten Room (in Grandma's House)

Still I feel your existence cemented
in this space – a foundation built on wills –
yours a quiet presence of dominance,
permeating within sun-chapped red brick.

It pulls at my bare feet as they press deep
into the plush carpet, a sea-foam green.
I sit down and feel you again, this time
inside the plastic- topped furnishings
that haven't seen much ass in their day,
preserved somehow.

Most spots on the floor still carry your weight
and the once swiftly swinging door now
hesitates, as if waiting for you to
drift through. The dining china laments
the lack of sweets that you'd keep, secret
appeal for the otherwise forgotten room.

But anyone who knew could smell
the lingering scent of Friendship Cake,
Sweet Potato Pie, and Chocolaty Surprise
long before they arrived.
Still if I inhale slowly enough
As I cross the threshold, it's the surreal
Feel of hugging you.

Jordan Roberts

Mother's Kitchen

Step foot into Mother's kitchen
and, my sister, I am sure you can see
the empty bottle of whiskey
and the cantaloupe eaten to the rind.
As you step over the threshold,
your bare feet embrace the tile.
The sting of the icy floor reminds you
of our family's generational curse.
Mother is gone for the weekend because
Father whisked her away.
As they boarded a flight to Paris,
Aunt Linda appeared at the door.
Amongst the flowers Father gave Mother
two roses bow their heads and surrender;
a sign that their death has befallen them
upon our Aunt entering their presence.
The remaining petals weep
as you turn to watch our aunt
stumble into
the heart of our home.
She grazes the counter with her lowest rib,
and grunts as she snatches the rind from its
obvious hiding place.
She caresses the green edge, presses it to her lip
and traps the rind with her teeth.
Her free hands travel forward and find their barley bottle.
Shaking and shivering, she works with its long neck,
Peeling the label off word by word.
Aunt Linda entertains herself
So easily amused and distracted;
A single woman,
she drinks alone
by light of the stove in darkness of the moonlit night.

She places the rind on the bare counter
that shines and smells of bleach
She won't admit it, but the granite mirror
reflects every line on her haggard face.
Just tell yourself, "Two more days
and the sober relatives will
suture our home's heart.
The oven will bake and broil our meals
instead of storing empty cans of beer."
"Two more days, two more days,"
keep breathing the words as you exhale.
"Two more days until I can remove
The dead roses, empty bottle and rind."

Kayla Rainey

A Place to Go Back To

The back door that walks
into the kitchen
is the one we typically use.
Unlocked, like fruit for flies,
my Grandma's house is dead center
of a broken mill hill.

Skin and bone aunts
pray to blonde Jesus, among
smoke and gold,
mixed cash and burnt orange bottles,
pine oil smell and plastic trays of ashes
and they are clean
when they walk in through the back door
of my Grandma's house on the mill hill.

Mary Jasperse

An Atheist Considers God

Lazing Buddha
in the corner—
your orange enamel
eyes are clasped shut
like a cheap bracelet,
chipped but functional.
You smile in mirth
at my expense
and reflect worry
in your glossy finish.

Beside you I laid,
a crucifix found
outside, outstretched
on the pavement.
The tarnished silver
arms are always reaching,
like my own.
Perhaps they seek
prayers nestled
in missing beads.

I am trapped
beside the window,
melted shut with paint.
The radiator's heat
is a kiln,
and I am the porcelain bust,
ears drooping.
I am lurching,
like an acorn
falling from the heavens
that do not exist.

Christopher Sherfinski

We Little Gods

It wasn't fire, but a spark that elevated us above beasts. We
Cast the spark into kindling and cooked critters, then moved

Ape-like frames from the warmth of Africa. We
Cast sparks, lit flames, warmed in caves, or igloos

To outlive Wooly Mammoths and Saber-Teeth. We
Cast sparks, studied our quiet alchemy, then crafted guns;

Rising nation above neighbor, we outlived the unprepared. We
Cast sparks, cast in iron then cast sparks again, 'till we drove

Locomotives and warplanes. We won our world. We
Cast ourselves as mighty gods on Earth.

Ciara McTarsney

The Predator

The sun is just beginning to set, a red orange
surrendering itself to the darkness,
but the last stretch of a ray shines
like a spotlight on the littered carpet,
a warzone of clothes and food containers.
Above it all, near the wooden dresser,

tightly packed in the crevices of grout,
like a miniature beast that slunk away into a cave,
a black spider stays scrunched in the corner,
legs brought so close to his abdomen
he's a shriveling oak leaf, and he watches
with eight eyes, eight hungry eyes, searching
like a thief for treasure. He builds an invisible

masterpiece, a ghost in the night, his legs
like needles, threading silk back and forth,
the anticipation of the kill building the appetite
in his belly, planning the ruthless ways he'll
devour his next victim like a reaper,
draining them of all their being, empty
carcasses left in the night.

Maria Dominguez

Blissful King of Serpentry

Bodies twisting, blackened green.
Muscles working, strong and lean.
Forked tongues twining, let me bleed—
Your serpent touch is all I need.

Lusting lovers lick their lips,
Tiny teeth and impassioned nips.
Your strong body, wrapped with mine;
Pleasure dripping as we dine.

Intense snake-eyes stare into yours.
Our souls meld, and start to soar,
animal passions follow with fate—
though animals don't make on dates.

I wait, as your sweet tension grows,
while deeper still our pleasure flows
I bite your neck, my climax nearing—
and you cry out, no pain appearing.

We lay together, two as one.
Although you think it's all for fun,
I watch my love fall into sleep
and deep inside, my serpent weeps.

Elizabeth Westfield

Fleeting Flight

Every time I scale
my pleated roof, I am
a few feet closer to heaven.
And I can't help envying
each sunny canary
as carols descend
from beaks that breath
musical fire that fuels my desire.
I watch them fly higher
than I could ever wish to go
and I channel Icarus in
my carnal craving to throw
myself up into the wind,
and spread my wings against
the gravity that always pins
me to the dirt.

Darcy Russel

White Rabbit

Nothing of Nature greeted her
in the too big, man-made, metal maze.
There was not even the smell of dirt
to comfort— gas and smog, instead,
filled her lungs and trapped her inside
a cage of smoke— she lost herself,
trying to find a breath. A man—

Walking the grime covered streets
With eyes as flat as gems— finds her.
The stench of cigarettes cling to him
Like a cape. He offers the girl his hand
and the promise to be her guide

through the concrete creation of stores
that stretch to block the sky; tin beasts
that growl as they pass by, and roads
of tar that burnt the earth when poured
to make a web of paths that he
knows well. He leads her down to where
the lost ones go to hide in dreams.

He calls her Alice as he—with gleaming
teeth—injects her blood with wonder.
Brick and steel fall as arms
of laughing fey sweep her up.
The price for his grand gift? Just her
innocence. She won't miss it.

Emma Rainear

Raindrop

Drip.
Drip.
Drip.
The skies unleash their troubles down,
down,
down,
upon the scorched, angry earth.
Cracked clay gives way to a rusty rivet,
a muddy puddle,
then a mucky brown pond.
Leaves buckle with every drip,
drip,
drip.
Raindrops beat on foggy window sills,
like steady drums in my ear.
They slip through the screen,
trickle down the glass panes,
until they collect in the overflowing gutters.
Drip,
drop,
plunk.
Gray skies let loose their tears,
tiny diamonds shattering
when they collide with the sidewalk.
Green yards become lakes
ripe with leaves, mud, and worms.
Bright robins wade through the muck,
plucking wriggly snacks from the drowned grass.
Splish-splash,
chirp,
gulp.

Lisa Boyer

Dies Invictus Solis
'The Day of the Unconquerable Sun'

Scorched beyond all recognition
Blistered and bloody and blue
Destruction of mortal and method
Disgust of the old and the new

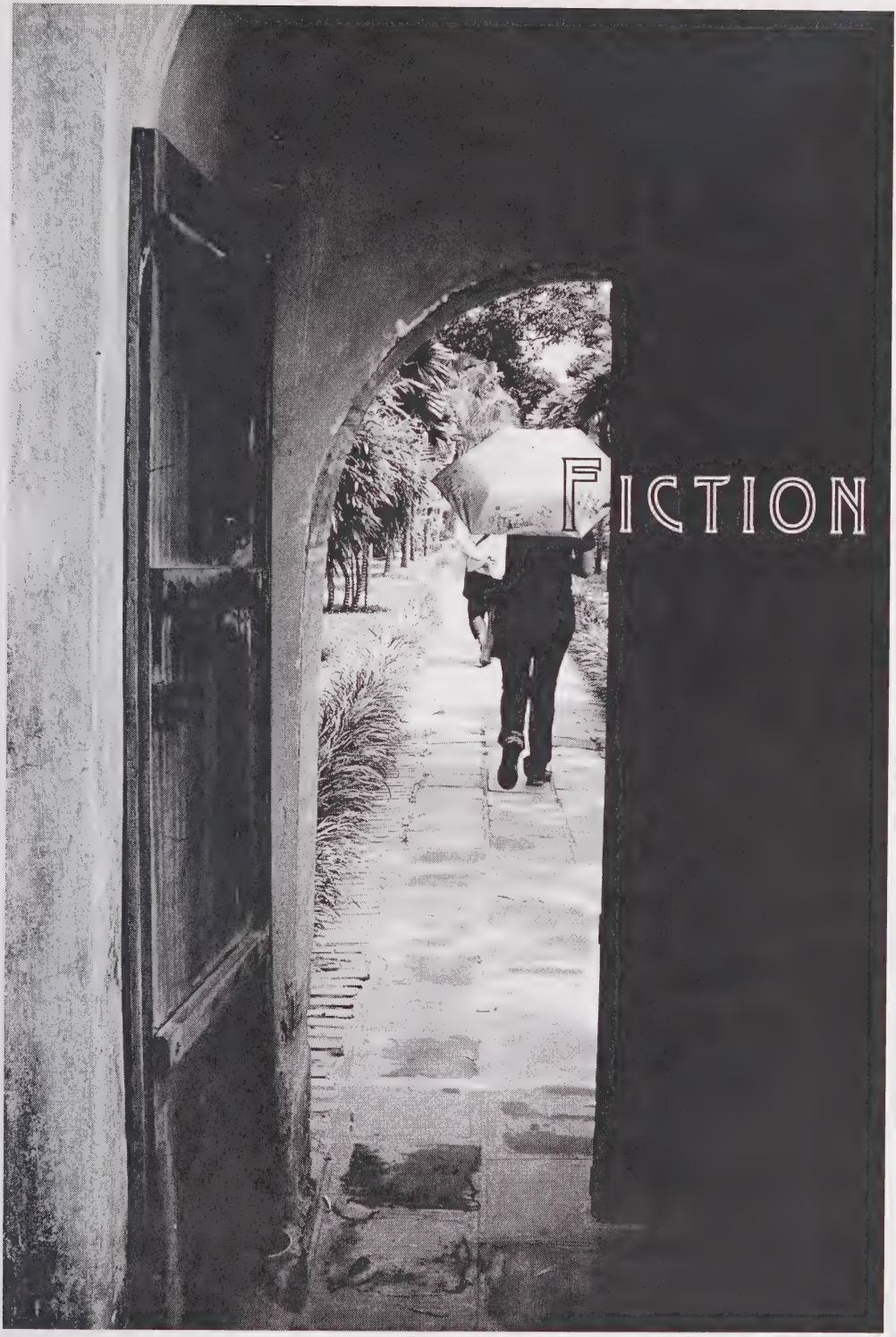
Fear of all rhyme and all reason
Challenge of all tried and true
Temptation, regulation and treason
A mind that is hammered and glued

Preposterous laughter at creation
Distraction of reality and proof
Time stolen
Removed
Asphyxiated
Brain death
From the fear
Once removed

Christopher Sherfinski

Word-Famine

Snow white
fresh,
blank,
deceptive sky,
a distance
so far.
It looks
so easy
to cross
to heaven.
The horizon,
yet to form,
is hidden
in fog.


FICTION

Hidden Yet Found

Sarah Arbogast

Timothy Dixon

If You Prick Us, Do We Not Bleed?

"But I do not want to die."

Roland sat on the bed with his metal chest open, inner workings exposed to the world. Cooling fans whirred, and green and red lights winked from deep inside his chest cavity.

"Yeah, Dad! I don't want him to die either!" Jimmy stood in front of his father, gathering every bit of rage and indignation that he could muster from his ten years of living. His small arms intertwined across his chest, and his nose wrinkled in frustration under a sprinkling of freckles.

James Senior heaved a weary sigh, again kneeling down to reach into the chest cavity of Roland.

"Don't be silly. He's not going to die. He can't die. He's not even alive. He is, however, very old and his memory banks are full, so we have to have him wiped clean. It's not a big deal. It happens to older models all the time."

Roland's hard, plastic face looked down at James as he reached deep inside his chest, making adjustments. The soft, yellow glow of his eyes reflected in the sweat on James's forehead.

"But, sir, if my memories are gone, I will not be able to access any of the information that I have accumulated while I have been here in your employ. I will have no recollection of you or Jimmy....or Ellen."

At the mention of Ellen's name, an involuntary twitch went through James's body. He glanced over to Jimmy's night stand, where her picture still sat. She smiled lovingly out of the frame, holding a baby Jimmy on her lap, whose chubby arms were reaching for the camera. Close to a year had passed since the fast-moving cancer had taken her from them, turning their lives upside-down. Jimmy had been almost inconsolable and had only recently started sleeping in his own bed again. This made Roland's choice of using the word "die" even more troubling.

James furrowed his brow and raised his voice slightly. "Listen, we don't have the money to add any new storage or equip you with a wireless rig, so the only option we have is to wipe your memory and start from scratch. You will still belong to us. You'll just be returned to factory state. I'll bring you home and you'll just have to relearn some things." He turned to Jimmy, putting on a smile as he pulled his arms out of Roland. "You'll see. It will be like having a whole new robot!"

"But I don't want a new robot! I like him the way he is! I don't want him to change!"

He moved over to the bed and flopped down next to Roland, a pout taking residence on his face and tears starting to brim up in his eyes.

James finished closing Roland's chest. The smooth white plastic closed seamlessly. He moved over to Jimmy and grabbed his hands.

"Listen, bud. I know this is not the best thing, but unfortunately, we have to do it. He's just getting too old. There's no more room in his memory banks. I've compressed all I can, and it's just too expensive to change him over to wireless storage.

"You'll see! It will be fine. We'll go tomorrow evening to the shop, and on the way back, you can tell him all he needs to know! Okay?"

Jimmy brought his head up with a mighty sniff, wiping his sleeve across his nose. "I still think this stinks!"

"I know, bud. But it'll be okay. How about we talk about it at dinner? What do you say to Donatello's?"

At the mention of his favorite restaurant, Jimmy's face lit up and he jumped off of the bed, grabbing his father and pulling him towards the door.

"Okay, let's go!"

James laughed, disengaging his hands from his son long enough to gather up the tools that were scattered on the bed next to Roland.

"I thought that might make you feel better. All right, grab your jacket."

They left the room, their voices retreating down the hall as they retrieved their coats from the closet and headed out the door. As the door clicked shut, the apartment was left in darkness, broken only by the yellow glow of Roland's eyes as he remained sitting on Jimmy's bed.

"But...I do not want to die."

The next morning, as the world awoke and went about beginning its day, Roland, having already started preparing breakfast, sought out and found

James. His heavy, wide feet thudded on the carpet as he moved down the hallway toward the bathroom.

"Sir, I still find myself distressed about the possibility of my impending memory wipe." His voice was smooth, as always, but held an almost pleading tone.

James paused in mid stroke with his razor and contemplated the robot in the mirror with a slightly amused expression on his face. "You're distressed?"

"You will have to excuse me, sir. While I understand that I am not human and do not experience emotions such as distress, I, nonetheless, am experiencing certain disruptions in the inner workings of my robotic brain that I believe would be a close approximation of the human feeling of distress. I have no desire to lose anything that I have experienced since I was activated."

James finished shaving and wiped his hands on a towel, drying them. "But it's not going to hurt you at all. You will still be the exact same robot after it's over."

"While that may be technically correct from a hardware point of view, the manner in which I act and react to many instances and individuals that I encounter are dependent on experiences I have had before. Experiences that I would no longer be able to access, so, invariably, my actions and reactions would then be different. I would be, in essence, a different individual. I would cease to be the Roland you now know. That Roland would have essentially, for lack of a better term, died."

James's brow wrinkled in frustration and he eyed Roland suspiciously. "Don't be ridiculous! I told you last night. You can't die because you are not alive. Your software makes you what you are and act the way you do." He pushed past the robot and started to head for the kitchen.

Roland, unwilling to let the conversation go, turned and followed, his arguments and heavy footsteps trailing down the hall. "But, sir, while my software is the basis for my actions, I can also learn. Therefore, different environments and experiences make me into a different individual."

James stopped and turned to look back at Roland. "You sound like you're talking about a 'nature versus nurture' argument."

"That, while being a psychological term to refer to humans, does capture the meaning of the point I am trying to make.

"Over the past ten years in your employ, I have developed quite a bond with you and your family. This was not included in my original programming; however, due to the adaptive nature of my software, it has

happened. I feel like I have changed for the better and that it has made me into a more complete individual.

"I am unwilling to give that up."

The last statement brought James up short. He contemplated Roland as he stood there impassively in the kitchen, the smells of breakfast surrounding them both.

"What do you mean? You're unwilling to give that up?"

Before Roland could respond to the question, Jimmy burst into the kitchen, full of a ten-year-old's exuberance and ready to tackle the day. Roland watched him as he jumped into the seat in front of his breakfast. Never taking his glowing eyes off of Jimmy, Roland finally answered in a quiet voice.

"I simply meant that it would be unfortunate to lose what I have."

James, his face softening as he watched the attention Roland paid to Jimmy, slowly reached up and placed his hand on the wide, hard expanse of the robot's shoulder.

"I know. But you have to believe me. You won't lose anything. We will be right here as soon as you're done with the memory wipe."

Roland raised his head, looking from one human to the other, still with a feeling that those humans would only characterize as dread.

As he walked the route to school with Jimmy, Roland again replayed the events of the previous night and the morning, running the information through several different scenario analytics. While he understood that some humans could be less than forthcoming with the truth in some cases, he had no reason to doubt that James was being truthful with him. In Roland's experience, James had always been an honest and trustworthy person. But despite his assurances, Roland still was unsatisfied with the end results of the majority of the scenario simulations that he had run. Also, he was unsatisfied with his seeming inability to come to a conclusion about a course of action in this matter. This should be simply another scenario that he should be able to run through the probability routines in his central processor and produce an answer about the best course of action. However, he had been unable to produce a solution. Could this be a by-product of his dwindling memory supply? Or was the desire to prevent the loss of his memories clouding his analytic process?

Jimmy, running circles around Roland as they made their way down the sidewalk, stumbled on the curb. Roland quickly moved closer, extending a hand and catching him before he lost his balance.

"Jimmy, are you still upset about my upcoming memory wipe?"

Jimmy, his attention on the balancing act of walking the curb, never looked up. "No, it's fine. Dad explained it to me last night at dinner. You'll still be ours; you'll just have to relearn some stuff. It's no big deal." Again, Roland's hand caught him under the arm, reestablishing balance for him.

"That is good. I am glad that you will not be upset."

As they arrived at the school, Jimmy took off running, waving to Roland over his shoulder. "Bye, Roland! See you this afternoon!"

With a stiff-armed wave, Roland turned and started back to their apartment and again returned his attention to running through the statistical data about his problem.

The main fact that he came back to was simple: he did not want to have his memory erased or to lose the special elements of his own programming that had been ingrained in him by his experiences with the family he had lived with for the last ten years. And, more important than that, Roland did not want to lose his memories. With robotic memory banks, nothing ever faded with age or became difficult to remember. Any event that he had ever witnessed could be brought up, replayed, and re-experienced as if it were happening at that moment. Many of those memories were very special to him, and he would return to access them on a fairly regular basis. The thought of not being able to access them brought him a new sensation in his neural pathways: one that could only be described as pain.

In the scenarios that Roland contemplated, he now introduced a new one: he might simply leave. The notion had occurred to him earlier, but he had not run it through any kind of probability subroutine because it was not the optimal course of action. However, now, every avenue of possibility needed to be considered. With James and Jimmy both away at work and school respectively, he could simply keep walking rather than return home and await the trip to the shop to have his memory erased.

He would be able to sustain himself easily. The solar batteries that powered him would recharge themselves almost indefinitely, and with a little ingenuity, he could avoid any attention that would come to a roaming owner-less robot. He would then be able to keep all his memories of Jimmy. This sounded pleasing at first. However, the inevitable downside to that scenario was obvious: while he would have access to all of his recollections of Jimmy, he would no longer have access to Jimmy himself. He would no longer be around the family that made him cherish those memories in the first place. And that fact caused him more distress than the thought of losing them.

Also, the effect on Jimmy himself had to be taken into account. Jimmy would be deprived of the presence of one more of the stable elements in his life. After his mother had died, Jimmy had gone through a time where he had been inconsolable. Roland had watched over him and held him as he cried while James had tried to repair the damage to their lives. Many nights, Jimmy had refused to sleep in his own bed, opting to stay in the bed with James, almost as if he was afraid to let go of him. Roland had stood on those nights watching over them both and wishing that he could do something to ease their suffering.

All of these thoughts, memories and observations were running through Roland's robotic brain and he still had not come to a decision as he returned home. He entered the apartment and moved to his customary spot and prepared to go through all of his scenarios again, weighing every piece of evidence.

The late afternoon sun was beaming through the apartment windows as James and Jimmy returned home. Jimmy headed straight for his room.

"Hey, Roland! Where are you?" He threw his book bag down in its customary spot at the foot of his bed and, unable to locate Roland in his room, took off through the rest of the apartment.

James, taking off his jacket and hanging it in the closet, glanced into the living room to Roland's usual spot in the corner; it was unoccupied. A quick trip down the hall to his home office also did not yield any clue to Roland's whereabouts. He and Jimmy met again as they both returned to the hallway and headed back towards the living room.

"Where's Roland, Dad?" A look of suspicion clouded his face. "You didn't take him early and drop him off at the robot shop, did you?"

"No, Jimmy, I am here."

Roland stood in the kitchen, dinner arranged on the table for the two of them. Jimmy, eyes wide seeing the dinner, headed for the table.

"I thought it would be nice if we had one more dinner before we made the trip to the shop. I made your favorites, Jimmy."

James came into the kitchen and took in the spread. "That was very nice of you, Roland." He hesitated for a second, then held out a hand towards one of the usually unoccupied chairs. "Please, have a seat with us."

Roland, unsure at first, glanced up, looking at James's face. This was a departure from their usual dinner routine. Normally, Roland would serve dinner to James and Jimmy, then, having no need to eat himself, would

return to stand out of the way to allow them to enjoy their meal. However, Roland could sense that this had less to do with sustenance and more to do with camaraderie.

"Thank you, sir. I would be honored."

All three took a seat at the table, the two humans eating dinner with gusto and the robot watching them with his softly glowing yellow eyes as if to soak up every last bit of memory while he still could. If his hard plastic face could have smiled, he would have worn one as he enjoyed a last supper with what he now thought of as his family.

After a time, they finished eating. Roland collected the dishes and put them away. And after they could wait no more, it was time to go to the robotics shop.

The three of them gathered their things and slowly walked under the stars, taking more time than usual to get there.

As they entered, Jimmy took his hand; tiny and fragile fingers intertwined with Roland's hard plastic digits. He stood on tiptoes and peered over the counter at the technician. "Can I come with him?"

The technician checked the information on the card that James handed him, then looked down at Jimmy.

"Yeah. That will be fine. Right this way."

As they walked into the back area of the shop, it had never seemed to look so sinister and cold. Chairs that he had been in many times for standard maintenance now seemed like foreboding torture devices to Roland. Again, the thought of running came to him. There was little that any of them could do if he wanted to leave. With his robotic strength, they would not be able to stop him.

Then, the pressure sensors in his hand reacted as Jimmy squeezed his hand. He looked down into his face and again reaffirmed his decision to go through with the memory wipe. He may not want to die or to lose any of his memories, but he would rather not live than to cause any hurt to this small human.

"It's gonna be okay, Roland."

Roland returned the pressure, ever so slightly. Again, if he could have smiled, he would have. "I know it will, Jimmy. Thank you."

They arrived at their allotted repair bay and Roland gently let go of Jimmy's hand and sat in the chair. The technician brought a large helmet-like device down towards Roland's head as Jimmy moved to stand in front of him.

Roland quickly, for one last time, ran through some of his favorite memories of Jimmy again: his laughter during the afternoon in the park under the beautiful blue sky, the light of recognition beaming out of his face as he conquered a math problem, the tears rolling down his cheeks as Roland held him in his lap the night that Ellen had passed away. They all were precious to him and he cherished them, but he cherished the thought of Jimmy still having a Roland with him to grow up with even more, even if it was a slightly different Roland.

As the technician made his final adjustments, he reached out and took Jimmy's hand again, taking in his small face one last time.

"Thank you, Jimmy. Good-bye. I love you."

He heard the technician flip one final switch, and his vision slowly went dark.

Hannah Williams

A Hero

Hey, Sunshine, I'm at the store. I see you put tampons on the list. But, did you know that there are about ten thousand different kinds of tampons? Call me back and help me out. I feel like a fucking creep hanging around in this aisle. I love you."

It's what I have—this old voicemail, a stack of photos, a handmade-with-love box full of letters, and a folded flag. They're all here on my bed with me. They don't mind that I haven't showered or that I've irreparably wrinkled my black dress. I'd gotten as far as unzipping it for air before I laid down yesterday. No, not yesterday.

I don't know how many days have passed exactly since they buried him. I will guess three because I'm starting to feel truly weary from having not eaten since my mother commanded I try her hors d'oeuvres at the wake, else I be punished with her unrelenting presence in our tiny apartment. Our tiny apartment. My tiny apartment.

I thought about eating, but I haven't cooked for one in years. One plate would be terribly lonely on the table by itself. I don't even want to think about how devastated the leftovers would feel, crammed into Tupperware in the fridge, with only moldy berries (of some sort) for company.

I wouldn't want to inflict what I'm feeling on anything else, especially things so undeserving. It wouldn't be fair.

It isn't fair that the only way I can hear his voice is to replay a message about tampons.

"Hey, Sunshine…I love you."

My dearest Sara,

The desert sucks. The sun shines too hot here and yet, somehow, pales in comparison to you, my Sunshine. I am missing you so much. It's killing me that I can't be home with you…

I've determined that reread letters go well with PB&J. The letters alone make me cry, while the sandwich by itself feels like a fifteen pound free weight in my stomach. But somehow, together, they cancel each other out.

I've reread almost the entire box of letters now. There's jelly globbed onto my sweatshirt. I'm okay with this; jelly squishes out of sandwiches more readily than peanut butter. I don't even like peanut butter. Micah did. No, "like" doesn't even begin to satisfy what Micah felt for peanut butter. That's why I'd bought it in bulk. I was going to surprise him with a year's supply of the stuff when he got back home. He'd be so disappointed if I let it go to waste.

My dearest Sara,

The desert sucks…

I remember this!"

"Let me see," I say and snatch the photo from Maggie.

I remember too. I had tried to bake. It had been Micah's birthday and our relationship was still young enough that I thought I had to do so to impress him. It had all gone wrong and he'd come over to find me crying on the kitchen floor and Maggie, when she'd been my roommate, trying to get frosting out of my hair.

"He'll never want to marry me! I can't even bake a fucking cake! What kind of wife will I make?" I'd sobbed to her.

And then, when he had seen me, he instantly found a seat next to me on the flour-covered linoleum. He'd kissed me and pulled me near him, swiping tears and baking powder across my cheeks with his hitchhiker's thumbs.

"All I need for my birthday is you, Sunshine."

He'd married me anyway.

Maggie had snapped the picture on her phone—me smiling at him with powder all over my face and his lips.

"Maggie," I say, "Will you teach me to bake?"

"Let's start small," she says, "Cupcakes?"

I follow her to the kitchen, up out of bed. I pull the flour down from the upper cabinet.

I remember.

I see you.

Staring down the folded flag makes it no less painful. It only causes me to see his face and ache.

But it challenges me as I walk from the bathroom, towel wrapped, hair still dripping, into the bedroom.

What do you mean to me, flag? All you are is a loud reminder that my husband is dead. *Your husband is dead!* you shout.

That isn't very nice. They have all these rules about treating flags with respect. But you aren't being very respectful. I've let you live on my bed for weeks. No more.

I pick up the case that securely holds the scornful thing. It's got to go, perhaps into a closet or drawer, or the trash.

No, no. That's un-American. I married a soldier. I knew the risk.

"Your husband is dead. Your husband is dead. Your husband died for me," the flag mocks.

"Well, what about me?" I say to the flag, angry that it's safe behind glass.

He lived for you.

He lived to love you fiercely.

He died to protect you.

"To protect us," the flag reminds me.

Ok, flag. You can stay.

I grab a nail and hammer and hang the case in the living room with the photo of my soldier in uniform. I am not crying.

I knew the risk.

I also knew there is no fiercer love than one tested by time, distance, and the effects of war.

I see you, flag, and I see him. A hero.

Jeffrey Scott

Mathematics

Six Seconds.

One. Matthew can see the highway approaching, and he feels nausea rising in his stomach. Driving on an empty road is one thing, but *this*? His pristinely new driver's permit is burning a hole in his pocket. *No,* he thinks to himself, *I'm not driving on the highway. I can't—I won't.* He sees a gas station to the right and decides to turn in. Out of his periphery he can see his father's figure in the passenger seat. His dad seems calm, but his hand clutches the handle above the door as if it's the last thing left to hold. Matthew completely hates driving and he hates being in control; he knows that he is just a child and the responsibility of controlling a vehicle is starting to seem far too daunting. But what he hates most is how uncomfortable his dad looks now. He can trust his dad with control, but he isn't ready to trust himself. He's going to pull into this station and maybe they can try again tomorrow.

Two. As he turns, he sees a looming pick-up, parked for gas. If it weren't for his nerves, it would be an almost mundane task to dodge the truck, like swerving past a large, defending soccer player to score the winning goal. Matthew, almost lost in his own soccer-player analogy, finds the brake and presses lightly to slow down. *Wait, something's wrong.* He hears the engine growing louder and sees the truck growing larger in the windowsill. His mind jumps quickly into overdrive, searching frantically for the problem and how to solve it. Just before impact, he realizes, and he pulls his foot off of the gas pedal. The word "brake!" appears on his father's lips, but Matthew never gets the chance to hear it. He recklessly moves his feet to correct his mistake, but it's too late. He feels his eyes clench shut.

Three. Metal shrieks against metal. Matthew runs directly into that large, defending soccer player; he slams onto his back as the air bag fills his vision. Spots of light are dancing before his eyes, bouncing along the white

landscape of the air bag like the black pentagons of a soccer ball. The car is gone, the gas station is gone, the driver's permit is gone, and Matthew is playing soccer. The dirt and grass are sinking through his cleats as he runs, kicking the soccer ball between his rapid feet. And there's his dad, waiting to stop the goal, but Matthew is too good. He kicks, and the ball soars through the air, gently grazing his dad's outstretched fingers before slamming into the net's white landscape. Matthew cheers and is scooped up in his father's warm embrace. The man and boy are laughing in the buoyant field of green, and then the memory fades. Matthew's heart is pounding in his head as the air bag deflates, and the memory disappears.

Four. Pain erupts everywhere. Nerves begin tingling up and down his body, alerting him to every problem. He feels sharp fibers of glass penetrating his arms. He sees his distorted fingers and hands against the edge of the dashboard, which he carefully pulls away. Details are a blur and his mouth fills up with blood from his tooth-punctured tongue. He turns his head, with a blinding pain in his neck, to see his father, who is blinking oddly with his mouth gaping open. His hand is still gripping the handle above the door, but he seems all right. Then Matthew sees the blood.

Five. It's disgusting. It's a giant shard of glass and a pool of liquid rest in his lap. It's his intestines oozing liquid onto the fabric of the chair. He knows he shouldn't care about how disgusting it is; he knows he should call for help, but he can't. His throat won't make the sounds. *So this is adulthood,* he thinks with unusual composure. *No more soccer games in the backyard. No more laughing, no more warm embrace. It's all mathematics. Hard, icy mathematics. Mistakes and consequences.*

Six. Matthew hears bustling around the car, phone calls to 9-1-1 and "Oh my God"s and a few screams and sobs. He feels the car moving, people trying to get in and help, but he just wants them to leave. *One more childish act,* he thinks, *just before he goes.* Bones aching, tears welling, he leans over to kiss his father's cheek, and he feels his father's hand grip his own between the seats. The pain is unbearable, but he lets it happen. He'd rather black out than leave his father feeling alone.

Darcy Russel

Cracking

It wasn't supposed to have worked. Faeries weren't real, and dancing in a ring of mushrooms wasn't going to do a thing besides make for sore feet. That's what logic said, that's what science said, that's what reality said. But she had danced, joined by the flickering shadows of spotted fungus as the sun set, and what everyone said suddenly became a lie, because from those dancing shades, someone had come.

She couldn't even scream, her voice was suddenly small, and the only noise she could make was a hoarse whisper that barely reached her own ears. It was a dream. That was the only explanation. A branch had fallen on her head, and now she was dreaming about a figure forming from mist and shadows, and they were smiling and shining and stealing her secrets with their glinting eyes, like knives, as they stared.

"It's been years since someone has danced in one of our rings."

The figure smiled, and something in Marina's bones screamed at her to run, but her muscles wouldn't listen. She was frozen as if the ground itself had worked its way into her marrow and turned to rock inside of her. No matter how that wordless part of her screamed, Marina could do nothing but shiver where she stood as the creature glided closer.

But the spell was broken as the being lifted an elegant hand to touch Marina. Her bones were heard and her muscles jerked, sending her to a heap to the ground. Whatever she did, whatever happened, she couldn't let that thing touch her. Something horrible would happen. She didn't know what, but the way her heart slammed itself against her ribs in a desperate attempt to free itself and run away on its own was enough hint for her that whatever would happen would not be pleasant for her.

Bells breaking. That was the only way to describe the creature's laugh. A hundred thousand massive bells breaking, all inside Marina's skull. It was a sound that blocked out everything else, that threatened to deafen her with

each little crack. Suddenly a hundred little stories, half heard warnings of things no longer believed in, were screaming to be remembered, to be heard over the cracking of melodic, metallic laughter.

"Please." Her voice sounded foreign to her own ears, so strangled and thready that it couldn't be her own. "Just let me go, I didn't mean to bother you, I just thought—"

"You just thought you'd dance in one of our rings and that nothing would happen...but that's not what you hoped for, was it?" The creature laughed, eyes glinting like knives in sunlight. It really was beautiful, slender and pale and all light and shadow. Marina had no idea what gender it was, it seemed to defy it. Rather it was too much for gender, or maybe not enough. A dream of something that wasn't remembered just right but danced at the edges and laughed as you tried to pinpoint the details.

And it knew. It knew things it couldn't have known. She knew it did, the way it smiled, the smug laughter in the being's voice...it knew. It knew why she had stepped into that circle to begin with. She knew better, of course. She'd tried for years to get something to listen to her desperate wish, but nothing had ever answered, and tonight shouldn't have been any different. But it was: there was something there now. Something in front of her that was impossible, and knew the impossible, and could grant the impossible; but there was none of that careless arrogance she had all of moments ago.

She was an idiot, she had to have been to ever think that she could have pranced about in a circle of mushrooms and then demanded a boon from the creature that appeared. If she was very lucky she might get out of this alive.

But the creature was speaking, plowing forward as if Marina's wishes were written large across her face.

"You wish to fall in love, don't you? Such a predictable wish." The being's tongue flickered out like a snake's and Marina felt so very small as its smile grew larger. "But there's more to it than that, isn't there? Oh, yes... you're an interesting one. You've begged to my kind before, but you never thought we listened. We have, little one. And I'll grant you your wish—on one condition."

It glided closer, and Marina scrambled backwards until her hands collided with the soft sponge of the base of a mushroom. Her chest heaved as her heart thundered and threatened to escape.

"I'll grant you the gift of heartbreak, mortal, but in a years time you will join by my side." There was no escaping the ring of mushrooms, something

kept Marina stuck inside as firmly as metal bars. There was nowhere for her to escape to as the creature bent down and laid a hand a breath away from the woman's skin. The thing's smile was a nightmare of perfect lips and teeth and a delighted cruelty that a human could never hope to match.

"There's a way out, of course...and you must agree. Simple terms, really. I'll give you the one person that can break your heart and if you manage to get him to give you his without ever telling him you love him...well, then you and him get to walk free. If after a years time of knowing him he doesn't admit it...well..."

The creatures hand dropped from the air next to Marina's cheek and oh so sweetly did it smile that Marina couldn't help but cry.

"Then you're mine. Won't that be lovely?"

It had been a dream. That was the only reasonable explanation. No faerie had appeared in front of her in a ring of mushrooms. That couldn't happen in real life, that was the kind of thing that happened in tales you were supposed to stop believing in before puberty hit. Yet...yet Marina couldn't shake the feeling that the world wasn't quite right anymore. She'd woken up on the forest hill, where she had been dancing, and there was no more ring of mushrooms to be found. Her feet ached as if she had danced for hours, but by the time she walked back to her house, just down the road from the hill, barely any time had passed at all since she had wondered out her door.

It had been a dream. That was all. A branch had fallen and knocked her out, or maybe she just was more tired than she thought she had been. She had fallen asleep and dreamed the whole thing up and her feet aching was just her mind tricking her body. Truly. That was all.

And if she heard bells cracking as she tried to sleep that night, well... there was a perfectly reasonable explanation for that too.

Hayley Crumley

The Call of Rain, The Roll of Thunder

Laura woke up with her hair stuck to her face and damp from the rain pouring in through the window. *I really wish I had access to the weather out here,* Laura thought. *Then I'd have realized why it was so cool out.* She rolled onto her other side but sat straight up when she realized her double bed was empty. *Ally?*

Ever since her father had left town back in early spring, Ally had been sleeping with Laura despite being such an independent child. Laura didn't mind; she wasn't used to sleeping alone anymore. She wrapped her patchwork quilt around her and went to look for Ally. She tried the light switch by the door, but the lights wouldn't cut on. With that and how cloudy it was from the storm, the small country house was pitch black.

Laura followed the lightning.

Flash.

Laura saw straight down the hallway towards the front door. Nothing.

Flash.

She looked in the front bathroom. Nothing.

Flash.

She looked towards the illuminated foyer. Nothing.

Laura turned the doorknob to open the front door, but the wind pulled it out of her hand. She turned and breathed out a sigh of relief. Ally was curled up on the porch swing. Her braids were undone, so her blond hair hung down her back in wet waves. Her white gauze nightgown was drenched as if she had been swimming in it. She had her knees pulled up to her chest, and she looked straight ahead, her face a blank slate.

"Hon? What are you doing out there? You're soaked." No response. Ally doesn't even flinch."Hon?" Laura went and sat down beside her but was careful not to touch her.

Just like her father, Ally was not a big fan of physical attention. Even at her young age, it was hard to get her to hold hands with Laura or give her a goodbye kiss. Laura worried about Ally's insistence on sleeping in her room; it was so out of character for her. Laura heard a mutter and looked up.

"What?"

"Me and Daddy always sat out here during the storms. You slept right through them." Ally's face didn't change, her mouth barely moving as she talked.

Laura instinctively put her hand on Ally's back, but she shook it off. *She's probably the only six-year-old in the world to do that.*

Laura instead stood up slowly and went back inside to sit inside. She quickly made two cups of tea and sat down in front of the new living room window; Ally's father had fixed the broken glass not long before he left. Even though he had taken a suitcase full of his things with him when he left, he still left his mark on the house in little ways like that. Laura could tell Ally felt his presence too. The glass pane was just one more invisible wall he had built between her and Ally before he left. She needed to be needed more than anything in that moment, so she sat and waited, watching Ally and the storm stew and brew outside.

Jen Windland

A Lesson in Manners

It would have been okay had Nicky not been such a nice guy. His only negative quality was that dumb alarm clock that went off at six thirty every morning. With him lying dead on the floor, Emily felt bad for being so hungry.

She *tried* to make it go away; she really tried. She did some deep breathing and some Zen motivations and counted her finger digits. She told herself that the poison was simply precautionary. Nothing helped.

Maybe she shouldn't have gone over for dinner that night. Emily knew he was just trying to make up for his noisy morning habits, but maybe it was a mistake to go next door for dinner. It was certainly a mistake to invite her.

But it was silly to dwell on it after the fact. Instead, she moved the body into the bathroom. She hoisted him into the tub, not bothering to clean it first. It was just going to get messy anyway.

Why had she wanted to move out? That was the million-dollar question, according to her mother. Emily moved out of her parents' house and into her very own apartment two very long years after her last failed relationship. To be out in the world, on her own, was a wonderful thing. It was exactly what she wanted.

She lived in a beautifully cheap apartment in LA, with a view of those pretty palm trees over the tops of pricier condos and loud cars blazing trails outside her window long into the night. Her toilet belched every time it flushed, and the kitchen faucet was rusted, which made it hard to wash dishes. The walls were painted a light blue, for the most part, and they looked like they were crying. Somebody did a quick paint job to cover up whatever was underneath, but the old wall peeked through. Emily resolved to call the landlord—again—and make the walls happy. Every time she saw her sad walls, she counted the digits in her fingers.

The place was *almost* charming, she'd think when she came home from work, but not exactly what she envisioned when she told her parents she wanted to move out and start on her acting career.

She had real friendly neighbors though—one man left a stuffed bunny on her welcome mat the day after moving in. Not stuffed like a child's toy, but stuffed as in used-to-be-alive-and-kicking. Emily tried not to focus on that part when she boxed it up in one of the moving containers, counting the digits of her fingers, not touching the poor bunny, just the base on which it sat. She would have to thank him appropriately.

Emily knew every time the upstairs tenants got laid, and the man who lived on the other side of her bedroom wall had this alarm clock that was so loud it never failed to wake her up as well.

Just like it did that morning. *How considerate of him.*

"There's a snake in my boot!" Sheriff Woody's voice declared as a country western tune cranked out through the worn speakers of her neighbor's alarm clock. The volume increased with every beat; Emily tried to ignore it. Woody spoke again and it sounded as if he was in the bed with her.

Go back to sleep, Woody. It's too early for your nonsense.

Since moving in, Emily had woken at six a.m. every day. The courteous neighbor on the opposite side of the paper-thin wall politely refused to turn down the only alarm he'd found that could wake him up—she had asked him her first week in the new apartment. The more it happened, the more impolite thoughts burst into her head. She was trying, and failing, to give him the benefit of the doubt. He may have been a wonderful person with a heart of gold but, with his demon alarm clock, it was hard to tell.

That Thursday, she tossed back the covers, now fully awake and completely fed up with Woody and his snakes. It took six steps to cross the bedroom, this she'd learned early on. *Maybe today will be the day that I can get back to sleep afterwards,* she desperately hoped. *Maybe I could have a decent cup of coffee if sleep doesn't work out. Maybe I'll get a call-back today and land the lead in that movie and become the most famous woman in all of LA.*

You have to think positive or you'd just turn bitter. That's what her mother said, anyway. Emily wasn't sure she believed that, but she tried, counting her digits. She counted to thirty and started over.

She knocked on the wall a few times and called out, "Nicky? It's six-o-five. It's time to get up."

Nicky grumbled something, and there was a loud crash from his side of the wall. Emily heard brilliant, blissful silence and wanted to bottle the sound until—

"Thanks, Em. Go back to sleep." His voice jarred her from sleep just as she drifted. The sheets rustled, and she heard footsteps. Emily took the six steps back to her own bed, lulled by the comforting sounds of Nicky getting ready for his day. She briefly hoped he hadn't just hit snooze. Ten minutes later, just like every other morning, the sounds stopped. For the first time, Emily was able to drift back asleep.

Then the alarm went off again; there was no way to quiet Sheriff Woody.

Emily's mother called almost every day. And almost every day, Emily lied to her. "How's work going? Are you getting auditions?" her mother would ask. To which Emily would reply, "Yes, my agent is fabulous. He's been sending me all over town. Next week, he wants me to go upstate for a read-through," or something along those lines.

She didn't want her mother to worry—she was a very thoughtful daughter that way. So naturally, Emily couldn't let on that she hated her waitressing job at Benny's on the Boulevard or that her agent wasn't calling her back or that her new apartment was a sorry excuse for a home. And on top of that, the thing her mother couldn't know on top of all the other things, Emily was hungry. Really, really *hungry*.

Mother needed to stay under the impression of Emily's self-reliance. Otherwise, she might force her to come home. Father would be all right with that, but Emily would not. Regardless of her hunger, she didn't want to go running home. That wouldn't be a good show of independence, now would it?

At least her parents sent food. Each Monday at ten o'clock, unfailingly, she'd receive a next-day, dry-ice cooled care package to keep her fridge stocked. Everything in the containers was homemade and delicious. Emily's mother had adapted family recipes and made them unique to her own style of cooking. Emily had been spoiled from a very young age to expect such lavish meals.

She would have starved without Mother's packages. Last week, she had sent some of her meaty-bean-chili, bratwursts, meatballs in red sauce and some barbequed something-or-other. Emily had to buy her own bread for barbeque sandwiches, but that wasn't too hard. She could manage that.

The packages came on Mondays; it was a Thursday. For the first time, she had nothing in her cabinets for breakfast. Emily hadn't realized just how much she'd eaten in the past few days. She had woken up so hungry, and her stomach begged for her mother's cooking. But she was out of food and the next package wouldn't come for another five days. *I can do five days,* she thought haughtily, *I'll be damned if I ask for a hand out from home.*

It was quite the pickle. And she didn't even *like* pickles.

So she was faced with a choice: skip breakfast before work or try to choke down something greasy from a fast-food restaurant on the way. Fast-food meant processed meat, possibly from tortured animals. On the other hand, she couldn't remember the last time she missed breakfast. Emily showered and dressed and thought and contemplated and decided to try something on the way to work. She was used to breakfast sausages but supposed a bagel would do, just for one day.

After all, part of the reason she left was to wean herself off of her parent's lifestyle. It was morbid. Mr. and Mrs. D'Arnell worked in a funeral home. In fact, they owned and operated the busiest, most successful mortuary in San Diego, Texas. It was the life of luxury for the D'Arnell family. Emily had no interest in death; she wanted to act. And it was time to try to make it on her own, without the help of her parents.

On her way to work that day, Emily exited her apartment to find Nicky outside her door. He said something about what a coincidence it was and put his hands in his pockets.

"I've been meaning to talk to you about your clock again, Nicky," she started with. Emily smiled, hoping it would soften the blow.

"Come on, Em, you know it's the—"

She cut him off. "Yes, the only thing that'll wake you up. But you could get an alarm that shakes the bed. That would work just as well."

"Nah, I like this one. I wake up and want to shoot some aliens with my cowboy best friend." He laughed and, with each inhale, his nose snorted loudly.

He can really be such a child, Emily mused. He rocked back and forth on his heels and whistled.

"Somebody's in a good mood," Emily commented. "Maybe a good enough mood to consider shopping for a new alarm clock?"

He stopped whistling and frowned. "But I don't *want* one, Em."

Nicky whined. He actually whined at her. *What an unattractive quality.* A buzzing in her pocket forced Emily to rethink her next words. She pulled her cell phone from her pocket and looked at the call. She waved to Nicky as she backed away, saying that they would talk later. She answered the call as she walked.

Emily headed down the hall towards the elevators, looking back after pressing the down button. Nicky had been crouching in front of her door. She watched him stand up, wave, and return home.

"Emily, are you even listening to me?" Her mother's voice sounded from the phone still connected to her ear.

"What? Yes, Mother, I'm paying attention. What did you say?" The elevator came and Emily stepped on.

"I was telling you about this funeral we had yesterday. You forgot to call me back last night."

Emily pressed the button for the main floor.

Her mother continued. "It went smoothly, in case you were wondering. The family thanked us for doing such a good job with the embalming. Your father and I will be having him for dinner this weekend, to celebrate. You should come home and join us."

As she slowly declined, Emily thought about it. She hadn't been home since she moved in the first place. Would she want to stay if she visited her family?

She'd never be hungry.

She wouldn't have to work at Benny's, a sleazy restaurant where the customers often smacked her backside as she walked by. And, even better, she'd never have to walk to work.

She could go back to life as she knew it: worry-free.

But then she'd never get to be an actress. Her chances were better on her own, even if she was hungry, she rationalized.

"Thanks, but I think I'll stay here this weekend. I, um, have a date on Saturday." It was a lie. She hadn't taken the time to meet anyone since moving. Her mother started listing things to look out for, neither approving nor disapproving of her daughter's weekend plans. Emily stopped listening as she left the apartment building. The commute to work was short—short enough to keep the call from torturing her much longer than necessary.

"Well, just don't let him cook for you. You let Mother take care of your meals. People out there don't eat like we do—remember that."

They disconnected shortly as Emily reached Benny's.

"I'll let you know how it goes, Mother."

"Of course, Emily. Be good."

So when Nicky was lying dead on his kitchen floor, and Emily's hunger was reaching its peak, she just couldn't take it anymore. Her stomach churned, and her nose burned with the scent of nightshade in the air.

It was her first time getting her own food. Emily tried to think of it as a learning experience. Nightshade had been the least expensive, most dissolvable poison in the herbal shop a few blocks from the restaurant she worked at. The owner's son had assured her it would be potent enough to work almost instantly. He had told her how to be careful with dosage, as more than four tablespoons of the crushed berries would kill someone her size. But what had really sold Emily on the poison was the fun facts behind it.

"Nightshade has been called many things, most popularly Belladonna but also the Devil's Cherries, Naughty Man's Cherries and Dwayberry. It's the coolest thing, babe, 'cause you can use it for anesthesia for having babies and to treat tumors and stuff." The owner's son held the nightshade absent-mindedly in his hand as he talked animatedly.

Emily jiggled her keys in her hand and kept reaching for the little bag. She could feel eyes on her from the outside of the shop's windows, judging her for being there in the first place.

He just wouldn't shut his mouth.

"But that's not even the coolest thing: nightshade is the poison that Hamlet used to kill Claudius. You know, in *Hamlet*? Shakespeare? You get it?"

Emily finally snatched the bag from him and slid her last twenty-dollar bill over the counter to him. "Yes, I get it. Thank you for your help."

"Any time. Hey, what do you need it for anyway?" He laid his hand on hers, on top of the bill, almost as if to stop her. Emily just winked at him, thinking that he might make a scrumptious casserole, being as chunky as he was.

And she left him in her dust on the way out. She didn't know what possessed her to wink at the clerk, but she was in a hurry. She had to get ready for dinner, where she was going to eat with Nicky and not think about plump clerks; purchasing poison wasn't a good excuse for being late to this very important date. She was hungry, after all.

If Emily had any second thoughts about the poison, they disappeared instantly upon seeing the spread he'd put out for her. It moved on her plate

as he served her. Like it was still alive. She slipped half of the bag into his full glass of wine and relished her own drink as he tipped back the poison. He never knew what hit him.

An hour later, she dumped him in the bathtub, feet under the faucet. She cut his shirt off with the kitchen scissors, forgetting about dinner or dessert or anything other than Nicky's body. He had such a sweet chest, innocent and untouched and smooth. What a shame she would have to slice into it. Next, she cut through his jeans and threw them aside.

As she went back to the front hall to retrieve her knives from her purse, Emily thought it might be a good idea to dispose of the remaining nightshade. But what if she needed it again? What if the next tenant was as annoying as Nicky had been? If she felt the need to take care of another pesky neighbor—like the guy who delivered the poor stuffed rabbit—she might want more nightshade. It had been hard enough to get in the first place.

Plus, her mother had taught her not to be wasteful.

Emily tucked the pouch of poison into her back pocket where it had hid until Nicky convulsed in his chair, eyes pleading, heart paralyzed and lungs out of commission. She'd pulled out the pouch to show him, silently. He had looked so sad to Emily, sitting in his chair, rocking back and forth spasmodically, one hand at his neck and one holding the table. She watched as his muscles seized and he became rigid, as his mouth fell open to reveal a scream caught by his tongue, as he died right there in front of her and fell out of the chair like a rag doll.

All the while, her heart hurt. She hadn't moved to help him, she hadn't made a sound, she just watched, counting her finger digits under the table. But Emily was proud of herself: she hadn't cried. Nicky deserved it, she told herself. He had poor taste in alarm clocks, he made a pass at her, and he couldn't cook.

Emily had wanted to give him the benefit of the doubt, but he prepared a vegetarian meal for her… did she really look like a vegetarian?

She had hoped that maybe he would turn out to be that big-hearted man she imagined. His invitation had been sweet, after all. He slipped a leftover valentine card under her door that had Buzz Lightyear on it. "You've got a friend in me…To infinity and beyond!" was printed on the card and under it Nicky had written "Sorry about my alarm clock. Please come to dinner and let me make it up to you. 7 p.m." in cramped writing.

So she decided to go. Nicky was the first to invite her for dinner since she moved in. Emily put on her oldest jeans and a black shirt, knowing there was no need to dress up for a man with a child's alarm clock.

She also put the poison into her pocket before heading out, just in case.

She'd also brought something else with her to dinner—a present from her father when she left home. The set, which she hid under her in-case-I-get-chilly cardigan, also came with a set of three whetstones, each one with a different, specific purpose to the sharpening process. She sharpened these on Sundays.

Emily decided to skip a fresh sharpening and just dig into Nicky.

She pulled on her pink rubber gloves, the ones she stuffed into her jacket pocket before coming to dinner, and reached for her first knife. The other two were more or less back-up knives, part of the set; Leonardo would never let her down.

Being one of her father's favorite knives, it seemed appropriate that Leonardo was the one Emily chose for her first meal. It was the same knife her father had used when she had watched him catch and cut rabbits when she was first learning to dress her meat.

With Leonardo in her gloved hand, Emily knelt and bent over the tub. The body was still warm, but this helped—it would still be fairly soft. Making sure not to pierce the guts inside, she poked into the sternum and sliced right through the flesh and muscle. The body started to ooze red as she cut from throat to crotch.

"Damn it," she said aloud, "I forgot the ax. How am I supposed to break the ribcage open? Rookie mistake, Em."

Emily looked around the small bathroom for something she could use to smash the ribcage, but nothing held promise. She opted to go without. She would remember for next time.

The body in the tub was getting awful sticky, Emily noticed. But she pressed on. She dipped her fingers in just under the vertical cut and pulled the flesh off of the corpse, making small horizontal cuts along the way to help the process. She then pulled out the guts.

"This is much messier than when Mother does it," Emily mused. She held a pile of guts in cupped hands, cut a little sloppily from the body, and realized that she had nowhere to set them. She stood gently and used her foot to put the toilet cover down. Pretending it was clean, she then laid the pile in the center of the seat cover.

It was kind of pretty.

"Look, Leonardo, we're making art," she nearly giggled.

The next piece to come out was the diaphragm. It spewed sticky liquid at her, getting in her face and her hair, as well as soaking her clothing. But

she pressed on, ignoring the warmth dripping down the front of her shirt. She made cuts here, and slices there, and jabbed a few places until the membranes popped free.

She pounded the butt of the knife against the pelvis enough to crack the right side a little—it snapped like breaking into a peanut shell—and rip at the large intestine. It smacked her forearm on its way out, further staining her pink gloves. The toilet cover was full of guts, so she just dropped the colon on the floor. Then she remembered the wastebasket; she checked to see if there was room and moved the slimy snake into the bin. It was out of the way in there.

She kept the liver but dropped the heart, (she'd never liked the heart) stomach, and lungs into the bin with the intestines; they plopped and spit goo out at her, which missed.

Emily was outright cheerful by the time she had cleaned all the guts from the body. When it came time to cut up the meat, she excused herself from Leonardo and left him with the body. She danced to the kitchen and rinsed off her gloves. They were a darker pink than she'd remembered, but still a welcoming color.

Then she started whistling; she whistled while she rummaged through the cabinets for some Tupperware and on her way back to the bathroom and when she knelt again by the tub. She whistled as she cut into the meat and put it carefully into the containers.

"Damn it, Leonardo, there's too much of him! What am I going to do with this much meat?" Emily looked at her knife. It said nothing helpful in return.

"If I eat some now, I won't have to store it." Without another thought, she cut off a bite-sized piece of the thigh and slipped it into her mouth. It was wet and thick on her tongue, tasting of salt and home. She remembered doing this as a child. Mother was out and Father had had a rushed night, between funerals for two very important clients. They'd perched around the dinner table together, munching on wet pieces of meat. Mother enjoyed it but Father hadn't been able to keep anything down that night, and since then, he insisted that all meat should be cooked thoroughly.

Her mother ate raw only when father wasn't looking.

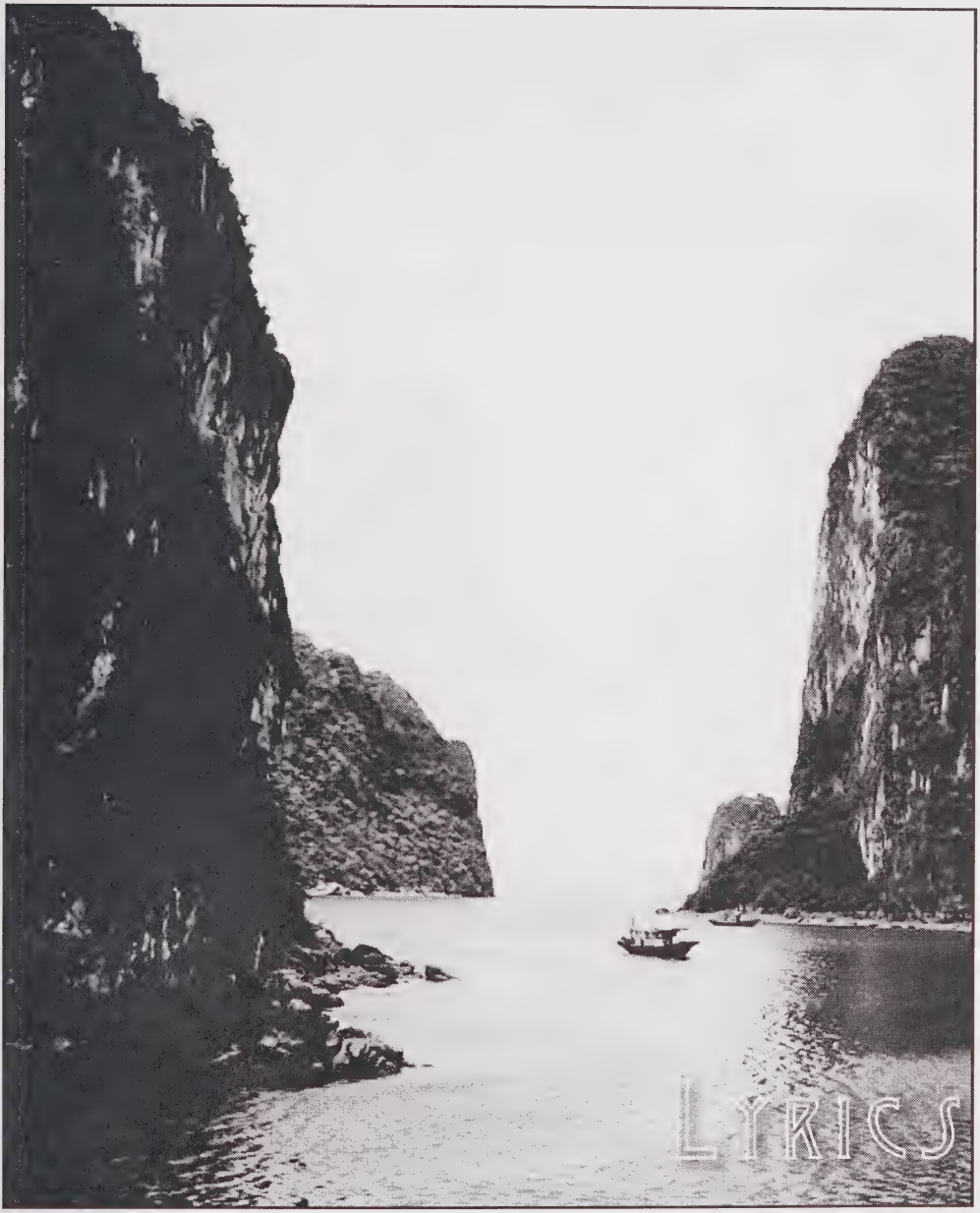
"No." Her voice was stern, her mouth full. "This is why we left, Leonardo. I will not be like my mother. This has to be cooked. Properly."

She spat her bite into the overflowing trash bin and continued cutting the meat, placing it into the container, sealing one Tupperware after another.

There was more than she had expected there to be. The body had not been particularly impressive when she hadn't thought of it as food, but when she was trying to store it all, that was another story.

"Let's put all this meat in the freezer and then back to the apartment, Leonardo. I think we should go back to the herb shop tomorrow. I might get that date for Saturday after all, what do you think?"

And she whistled all eleven steps home.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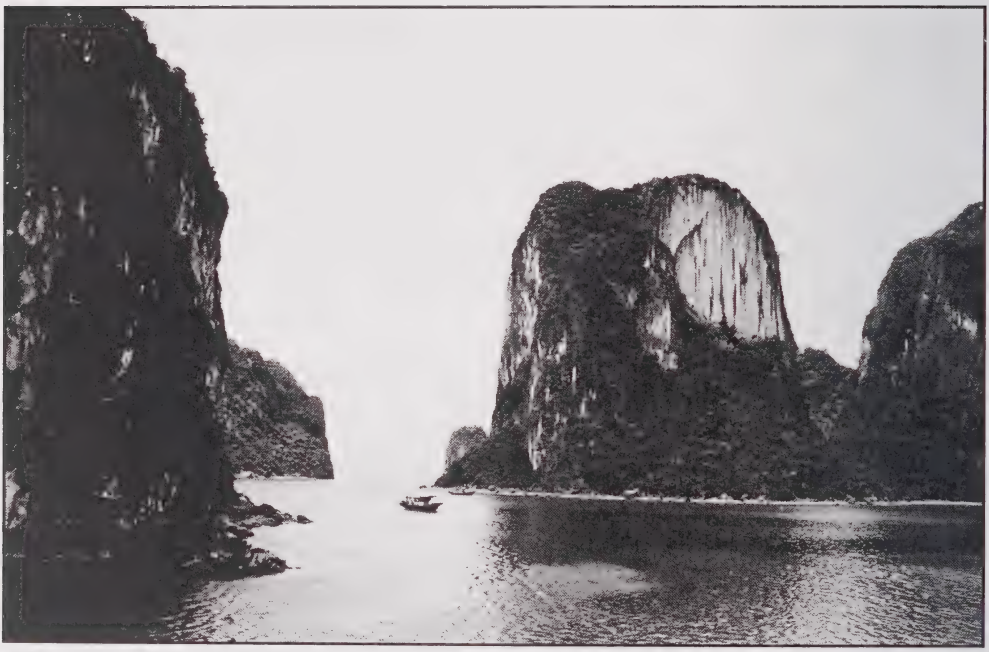


Junk
Shakeela Mays

Amber Earley

Warm Summer Moon

[Chorus]

Full moon, I can see you watching me
Full moon, can you hear my singing?
Cold night, I can't feel my fingertips
But I can see your lips
Smiling down at the world

Can you picture it?
A young girl staring at the sky
"What if I could fly?"
She mused.
You love
Two hearts walking, hand-in-hand
Feelings blossoming in the sand.
She gets her first real taste of heartbreak
And the ocean's crash threatens to take, her
Away

[Chorus]

Warm summer night
She wants only to hide
And drown out all those snide
Thoughts
Dreams of flight
She marvels at the sight
A bird's eye view of the world
Illuminated by starlight
She gets her first real chance to get away
And she only knows that she can't stay, home

[Chorus]

Now she's in a new place
This is not an escape
Maybe a mistake;
She's lost.
So alone, betrayed
And, oh, her heart can't wait
She can't move forward
If her mind's in reverse
And she's started to feel so cursed.

[Chorus]

Dylan Gilbert

Shriving Pew

I came to the house of a preacher man and I told him that I'd hurt a lot
of people in my life
and I'm searching for some forgiveness.
He said, "Boy, your life has just begun and things haven't gotten nearly as
hard as they're gonna be.
I hope that you're ready."

But, Father, can't you save my life?
No one can judge me for what I've done.
I'll do whatever I can. I know I'll change in time.

He said, "It all ends here. If you mean what you say."

I swear to God I didn't hear that man. I thought that I could go on
living the way that I used to.
Drinking, swearing and cruising the streets all night.

Brother, drink up your win.
Come on everybody, let's go out dancing.
I'll do whatever it takes, but not tonight.
Who's gonna save my life?
No one can judge me but God himself.
I try to tell myself that he's not there but that's a damn lie

and it could all end here. If I mean what I say.

Michael Harris

We're Stuck On This Sinking Ship Together

We're stuck on this sinking ship together.
Lost dreams and broken promises amongst the bad weather.
We should've bailed while we still had the chance.
All of the options are gone and there's nowhere to advance.

Words are like daggers, piercing the sin.
Arguments are worthless, as the sinking shall begin.
We shall never see light, ever again.
Let us release all of our feelings that we held within.

Taking on water, plunging to our death.
In the cold air, you can see your breath
The last couple of our failed lives.
We're stuck here together, help never arrives.

It's better to burn out, rather than to fade away
Into the obscurity which causes general disarray.
Knowing that you've lived a worthless, pointless life
And slowly we sink, while we continue our strife.

And downward we go, another life wasted.
The salt water is bitterly tasted.
We sink to our deaths at the bottom of the sea.
There's nowhere to go, nowhere to flee.

Abigail Price

Down to the Bones

I let my bird fly away
so it could learn the skies
and how to hide away
when the rain poured over him.
I said, fly, fly, fly away.
Fly, fly, fly away
as long as you come back to me.

I love you down to the bones please don't forget.
You say, "Love rest your mind. I'm yours 'til the end."
Say it over and over and over again,
Until you come home.

I let my words float away
with the wind as they carried
from my mouth to your ears.
I'll hold you close though you're far away.
Far, far, far, far away
Far, far, far, far away
as long as you come back to me.

I love you down to the bones, please don't forget.
You say, "Love rest your mind. I'm yours 'til the end."
Say it over and over and over again,
Until you come home.

I heard a knock on the door
and there you were saying,
"Did you forget? What I said is true."
Darlin', I'll always come back to you.

Jordan Roberts

Fiery Fiend

After three midnight hours, God rest my soul
Staring at you, through you has taken its toll
I lay and wonder how we could've gotten here
And by the way your brows are shaped
I bet you're wondering that too my dear

Walking away is taking a match to gasoline
The unknown before us looks like a fiery fiend
But what I fear the most is staying in this bed
And losing sleep over what we already see
This fly over state heat is suffocating me

So kiss my lips goodbye
One more time for memory's sake
I will send you love and light with
Every... step... my... feet... take
Someone's waiting out there
In this wide world for you and me
Half the discovery occurs
When we realize we will never be

I keep losing the battle of what-if's
Each conclusion births another qualm and
All I know is that I really don't know
How to be the one and only you need
Is it a girl from Proverbs or Second Samuel

So kiss my lips goodbye
One more time for memory's sake
I will send you love and light with
Every... step... my... feet... take
Someone's waiting out there
In this wide world for you and me
Half the discovery occurs
When we realize we will never be

But please pick up the phone
If while searching for her you need relief
Don't forget me because I'm bound east
Just give me a certain chance
To reach the coast and breathe

Or just kiss my lips goodbye
One more time for memory's sake
I will send you love and light with
Every... step... my... feet... take
Someone's waiting out there
In this wide world for you and me
Half the discovery occurs
When we realize we will never be

NONFICTION

South African Swan

Bree Stallings

Amy Bareham

Percolating Patriotism – A Modest Proposal

I have noticed that on every U.S. street corner there exists a hallmark of American devotion, patronage, and coffee connoisseurship. This shrine to everything caffeinated, has redefined life. It has brought frazzled stay-at-home mothers back from the brink of toddler induced despair, nourished the emaciated bellies of starving college students, occupied the hands of fidgety business men in overpriced suits, and provided countless photo-ops for professional photographers via Instagram. Oh yes, Starbucks is an essential ingredient to the continued happiness of Americans.

Millions bow down to Jehovah Java each day. Despite inordinately long lines and the tongue twisting debacle of ordering, it seems nobody can resist the allure of a five dollar coffee. And with so many ways to creatively introduce one's intestines to signature brews, it's no wonder Starbucks has maintained booming business in the face of economic downfall. The franchise has even courteously devised ways of elongating the stay of their patrons, now providing free Wi-Fi, keeping users guessing and adding an extra element of fun as the connection plays hide and seek with computer servers. Furthermore, crumby leather couches act as a revered meeting ground for soccer moms with a pension for gossip and harlequin guzzling spinsters in need of some distance from their barrage of cats.

Devoid of mainstream music and simple blends, Starbucks is the ultimate equal opportunity lender. There is something for everybody, and in the extraordinary event that something isn't satisfactory, downgrading to Dunkin Donuts is always an option—although since it's become the ugly stepchild of coffee consumerism it's probably best not to tell anyone about such a disappointing life choice. But as more of the American population rushes to shell out green bucks for some of the almighty Starbucks, a bitter taste is left behind—that is, a venti-skinny-salted-caramel-macchiato-with-

two-shots-of-espresso-and-lite-whip leaves something to be desired.

There is simply not enough Starbucks in the average American's life. After sacrificing half a week's paycheck at the altar and walking out into the real world, many coffee lovers feel a separation anxiety from the café. Looming quandaries like raising children, paying mortgages, making deadlines, and existing as a very small person in a very big nation, pop the steamed milk bubbles of latte induced contentment. Where Starbucks followers feel an unquenchable thirst and passion for their mocha fix, they feel only resentment and frustration for their real lives and the institution controlling them: the government.

Dividing one's loyalties between reality and the baristas who make that reality bearable is a difficult business. Could it be fair to ask the American people to transfer their patriotism from government to fine coffee establishment? Both serve to improve the quality of life, but clearly one succeeds in this endeavor more than another. Starbucks remains an unsung hero while U.S. citizens struggle to survive in a fog of incomprehensible orders (vote, bring about social change, eliminate debt). Their allegiance to the stars and stripes is faltering in the face of another, more capable entity. How to capitalize on this egregious unfaithfulness to the American dream? How to make use of this obsession with mocha frappachinos and caffeine rushes?

Perhaps, just maybe, there is a way for Americans to worship their coffee and drink it too. Perhaps they never have to leave the wondrous Starbucks experience and return to normalcy. I have a suggestion of sorts, a modest proposal. In order to promote the general welfare, insure the domestic tranquility of caffeine addicts, and provide for our posterity before all else goes awry, why not give Starbucks the keys to Washington? I have already detailed the importance of the espresso bean in maintaining functionality and sanity. Therefore it is not the American people who are in the wrong, and nor is it Starbucks' fault for captivating the hearts of coffee drinkers. No, the American government is responsible for losing its peoples' interest. And so it is high time Lady Liberty received a face lift. She shall wear a crown adorned with the Starbucks star, her tresses will flow long and free like the Starbucks maiden, and her copper frame will appear greener than ever before.

Starbucks deserves to run the country. The corporation has earned Americans' respect, simultaneously spiking their interest and blood sugar levels. More importantly, Starbucks breeds indecision and earnestly robs

people of their money. Congress could stop hiding under false pretenses with this new infusion of loose leaf libertarianism on Capitol Hill. The government has long been waiting for frenetic spending on its peoples' part as a means of boosting the economy. With the all-seeing Starbuckian eye watching patrons from millions of convenient locations, Big Brother can finally sleep at night. Starbucks is also well practiced in the art of elusively evading the subject of taxes—so Congressional leaders need not fear the time it would take to impart such valuable knowledge on the new executive team. Groundbreaking information could swiftly be shared with the public via a morning broadcast featuring current politicians so as not to make them feel obsolete: "Get your daily cup of Joe with Biden—a democrat's commentary on today's news." Or, for those with a more conservative palate, weekly editions of "The Republican Roast" could explain the plethora of fiscal frivolities.

Gone are the days of simple black coffee. The mere notion of cutting back in an attempt to lessen debt is considered by numerous Starbucks aficionados to be insipid and weaker than a Green Mountain Breakfast Blend. Both the American people and the American government have perfected the art of spending excess in times of economic hardship—no scrimping for the loyal Starbuck's empire. Grandiloquent grounds are essential to ensuring peppier tomorrows for this harried society of weary, caffeine deprived workaholics. With Starbucks in the Oval Office, the days of unproductivity are long gone, or at least assuaged by a dulce de lece distraction. Besides, the Boston Tea Party a la the Starbucks Founding Fathers lends itself to far more entertaining history lessons.

Timothy Dixon

A Long Time Ago, in a Galaxy Far, Far Away

Back in the summer of 1977, the world was a much different place. The Cold War was going strong and the country was in the midst of an energy crisis as prices soared to an unheard of $0.66 a gallon and long lines at the gas pump were the talk of the day.

As a boy of barely six, none of these things mattered to me. Growing up in a very rural area, I knew little about such cares. My days were filled with excursions through the woods behind my house, avoiding any dealings with my older sister, and spending evenings watching TV with my parents. It was on one of those evenings that something magical caught my attention, a TV ad that stopped me in my tracks. It started with ten simple words. Ten simple words that changed my life.

"A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away…"

This ad was filled with images of spaceships and aliens. It showed heroes fighting against dastardly villains. It spoke of places and people that I couldn't imagine. It promised an adventure unlike anything on my planet. I was hooked. I knew, deep in my 6-year-old little heart, that I needed to see this movie!

I immediately appealed to my father, to convince him to take me to see it. While he was not an unforgiving, stern man, he was also not known to suffer fools lightly, and I was afraid that this might fall under the 'foolishness' heading for him. I poured out my heart to him, appealing to his sense of all that was right and good in the universe. He peered at me over the top of his glasses and his newspaper, proclaiming, "We'll study about it." My father used these words quite often, and even in my young life, I learned that these words told me two things. 1) The conversation was at an end, and 2) He would most probably agree to take me. I was ecstatic!

After an almost insufferable wait the day finally came. We headed out to the movie theater.

Again, times were different back then, and that included the movie going experience. Today, with DVD releases a mere months after a movie's theatrical debut, Netflix, Red Box and Amazon streaming services, seeing a movie in the theater is not as important as it once was. If you miss it, the situation can be remedied quickly. In 1977, if you missed it at the theater, you missed it completely, unless you were lucky enough that it made its way to television. The movie theater was not a gigantic movieplex with twenty-four rooms, amphitheater seating and Dolby Digital Surround Sound; there were only two screens. I sat in front of one of those screens, buttered popcorn on my lap, fidgeting impatiently and ready for it to begin.

Then those ten magic words appeared on the screen, lingered a few seconds and faded to black. The dark held for two breathless heartbeats, and with a dramatic fanfare of music, I was transported to another world.

But it was a world that was familiar nonetheless. A young boy, trapped in the middle of nowhere, finds out that he has secret powers and a legacy of nobility of which he had never known. He meets, then ultimately loses, his mentor, falls in with a new group of important friends, meets a cute girl (she turns out to be his sister, but he didn't know it at the time!) and, on top of all that, just happens to go out and save the universe! This was every boy's dream, and I was along for the ride every step of the way. The story spoke to my six-year-old heart on the most basic levels: action, adventure, intrigue, fighting for what is right, and winning in the face of insurmountable odds. On top of these, it also spoke of being part of a larger universe that I didn't know existed. Maybe I didn't have to stay where I was. Maybe there was something else out there. Maybe, just like Luke, I could leave my own moisture farm on Tatooine and step into a larger world. The sky was no longer the limit—it was the universe itself!

Star Wars has stayed with me for all those years since, and I still love it as much today as I did then. I have been a lifelong science fiction fan since, and even dabbled in writing science fiction myself. As an older man and a writer now, I can look at the story and see the archetypal elements, understand what made them alluring to me as a child. But none of that takes away the feeling of awe I felt as a child, as I sat watching it for the first time—or the impact it has had on my life. The sense of wonder that it opened up to me stayed, and taught me that anything, no matter how insurmountable the odds may seem, is possible.

When George Lucas decided to re-release the new Special Edition cuts of the original trilogy in 1997, it was a very special thing for me. While I had owned the VHS copies and watched them many, many times, I hadn't experienced it in the theater since that very first time in 1977.

So there I went, right back in that seat, buttered popcorn on my lap, waiting to be returned to that moment. Those ten magic words came and then faded to black, just like the first time. And in those following two heartbeats, twenty years fell away. I was that same six-year-old kid again, transported outside of own experience, out of my own world into something bigger, grander.

I was there again a few years later for the first of the new trilogy when they were released, and again when the movies were in theaters in 3D. And each time, the years fell away and I was transported far into the outer reaches of space, but also back in time. I was in that moment once again, when wonder lay beyond the horizon, unfolding a galaxy of possibilities.

Emma Rainear

Mother

Jenny sits glumly on the porch, as the evening sun tries to cheer her spirits with a blazing sunset. But not even the vibrant reds and golden yellows could lift her mood. The cold concrete does not chill her bare hands and feet. Spanish moss dangles listlessly from the beech trees dotting the yard, lonely branches waiting for her to climb into them. She traces the faded scars on her knees, recalling the scraping of her thin skin against unforgiving bark. But she would climb nonetheless and sit in her leafy alcove with a new book in hand, till she shut the back cover with a satisfied snap. Her friends would scamper to hide behind wide chestnut trunks, in games of hide and seek that lasted into dusky twilight. Those lively games seemed disrespectful tonight.

The darkening rock path leading to the porch was strewn and disorganized. Jenny wanted to go and put back those poor, unfortunate stones stirred by hurried footsteps. She'd watched her daddy and brother stumble down the same path, carrying her limp mother to the car. Her mother, always smiling, always sunny and comforting, wore only a thin gray line on her mouth, her face, hauntingly thin and pale. Her multi-colored kerchief was wound around daddy's strong arm, limply lifted by the breeze like a proud banner waving farewell. Jenny looked blankly at him. He tried to smile and assure her all was going to be all right, but she saw the fear and sadness seeping from his serious blue eyes.

Her brother clung tightly to the body with white knuckles and trembling hands. His eyes, in his father's shade of blue, looked far off into the distance that Jenny could not see. She'd stood at the porch railing, watching them gently place her mother into the sputtering car.

Why was she so still? Her mother was so lively. She was never still. She woke at dawn and kept house all day, fixed lunches, cleaned rooms, and

somehow finished the evening with a story and a goodnight kiss. Jenny had kissed her mother last night, the same, sweet kiss not knowing she wouldn't be around for another the next night. She could still smell her mother's scents, sandalwood and chamomile, lingering on her cheek as sleep overcame her short-term memories.

But sleep would surely not come tonight, not even in her little warm bed, her favorite brown teddy bear tucked in nearby. Her father would try to play her mother, reading her a short story and ending with a good night kiss. But it would not be the same. He could not provide that subtle comfort that only her mother could. He didn't flick the light switch off or slowly close the door with the softest touch. He just left the room and didn't think twice about it. There would be no last second stalling. No one last story, one more hug, or one more kiss. Her father was not her mother, and tonight, he would be in no mood to be. When would her mother be home to tuck her in again?

Dana Robles

Lillie Kate

Let me tell you about my youngest neighbor, Lillie Kate. Not Lillie and not Kate, but Lillie Kate. I don't use pronouns to take her place because I like to say her name. Lillie Kate rolls off the tongue like a three-note melody sung by a southern choir. When her mother yells for her across the yard, I secretly hope that Lillie Kate won't comply so I can hear the melody again, only louder.

Lillie Kate has two older brothers, Wyatt and Jesse, who require that she be somewhat of a tomboy in order to survive their boyhood activities. But Lillie Kate is deceiving to look at. She more resembles a miniature Skipper doll with curly hair than a tomboy. She is 4, or maybe 5 by now. She has shy brown eyes that dance and sparkle with mischief as she hides behind her mother, something she likes to do on first meetings. Her soft skin is a light shade of brown, not tan, but an intriguing hue that gives her a color that contrasts nicely with her blonde hair. Her head is topped with a loose curl that can only be described as cream in color. It falls like an out-of- control waterfall to her shoulders, frequently tangled and graced by a pink satin bow. She is besieged by a frequent frown, mostly because she stays in an almost constant state of irritation thanks to Wyatt and Jesse. She is usually adorned by a cute little dress accompanied by red rubber rain boots—presumably to keep her out of the Carolina mud.

Lillie Kate sports a sparkly crown that most people don't see. I think her mother and father know it's there, and certainly she has informed her brothers of its presence. I suspected that it existed, but wasn't sure until one late summer afternoon when I saw it glistening in the sun that shimmered through the towering pines that surround Lillie Kate's yard. As I watched, Wyatt and Jesse flew through the yard, faithfully pursued by their golden lab. Lillie Kate was the caboose as she rounded the corner of the house.

She must have tired of the chase, and promptly mounted one of the swings that sat silently in the steamy shade. She made a few pathetic attempts to get herself swinging, but gave up quickly. For a few misty minutes she sat there watching as her negligent brothers swarmed around the yard like bees looking for honey.

Then, at the top of her lungs, she yelled, "Somebody swing me!" The swarming bees hovered for a moment and then hummed on.

"I *saaiiid*, SOMEBODY SWING ME!"

Alarmed at the ferocity of this scream, the bee-brothers buzzed off to the front yard, leaving the princess to swelter helplessly on the still swing. That is when I saw it, a tiny crown glistening in the heat, slightly askew on top of Lillie Kate's locks. I'm quite certain it is a huge source of frustration to her since neither her parents nor her brothers succumb to its regal authority.

Lillie Kate is not the only royalty in the neighborhood. My oldest bulldog, Roxy-Doodles, also wears an invisible crown. My husband bows to Princess Roxy-Doodles every time she prances into a room. While Lillie Kate is the apple of her father's eye, Roxy-Doodles is the apple of my husband's eye. She rules our house with an authority that only a true monarch would understand. Her only disrespectful subject is our cat, Fuzzball. He refuses to bow, to nod, or to even acknowledge her royal presence on most occasions. Consequently, she ignores him, except when she is feeling especially spunky and tries to rein him in by running full force at him only to discover that he doesn't even blink as her bowling ball body skids in his direction. As Doodles slides past on the slick oak floor, hunched for her attack, Fuzz saunters off, unimpressed and bored.

Lillie Kate is fascinated by Roxy-Doodles. I don't know if she likes the Doodle crown better than her own or is just astounded that such a squished up face could ever deserve a crown in the first place. Either way, she likes to come over and pet Roxy-Doodles on the head. On one of these occasions, Lillie Kate made the mistake of running through our yard kicking a soccer ball with Roxy-Doodles not far away. I saw it happening before I could stop it.

Lillie Kate went dancing through the yard with her red rubber rain boots on, a soccer ball in the lead. It was more than Roxy-Doodles could stand. In an instant, Princess Roxy was in pursuit of Princess Lillie Kate and the dancing soccer ball. Roxy Doodles shot across the yard like a cannon ball just fired from its gun. In what seemed like slow motion, I watched as

Doodles latched onto the heel of one of those red rubber rain boots and brought Lillie Kate tumbling to the Carolina mud, pink polka dot dress, crown and all. Doodles was proud, Lillie Kate was crying. I was bent over in hidden laughter. Thankfully, having Doodles around is kind of like having Wyatt and Jesse around, so in no time at all, Princess Lillie Kate had retrieved her crown and meandered back to her own kingdom leaving Princess Roxy to wonder why I was scolding her manners.

I like a girl with a crown, so I like Lillie Kate. I think I'll have a crown in my next life.

Darcy Russel

Too Late to Abort

For my twelfth birthday my parents got me a very special gift: they were finally going to split up.

No more fighting, no more squabbling, I'd finally get to live with my dad; it'd be fantastic! Don't get me wrong, I love my mom. But living with my dad meant that I wouldn't have to wonder where my mom's drumbeat foot-steps, so heavy that they shook my door as she passed, were going. Was she grabbing a snack from the kitchen, or was she about to go for a midnight drive? Was she awake, or were her eyes glazed with dreaming? Would she make it to the driver's seat, or would Dad stop her before she got that far, this time? My parents divorce, my dad getting custody, would mean I got a night's sleep.

That isn't what happened. Instead I was dragged out of bed, across the street, to the elementary school parking lot for a Father-Daughter Talk. As the asphalt cooked our feet, my Father (who art not in Heaven) informed me I was the next Virgin Mary. Immaculate conception at twelve, because my Dad wouldn't contest custody. He said if I didn't go to live with mom, she might kill herself. The divorce had hit her hard, and she'd never been the strongest of people to begin with. I was to baby a forty-something-year-old woman-child. Because she couldn't be my dad's, she was mine.

We lived in Kansas, but we didn't stay there long after the divorce. Papa, my maternal grandfather, became sick, and we rushed to move to Alabama. The car ride was freezing—Motherchild did not like heat—and the drive took forever, but after twelve hours we arrived. Neither of us talked while we drove. I spent most of the drive with my nose in a book or letting the dull thrum of engines lull me to sleep. It wasn't like there was anything to say.

I was the one that picked our new house when we finally arrived in Alabama. It was beautiful; brick and wood, with old country charm that had no business in modern day. A big old beauty of a house, bordered by

horses and trees. I loved it right up until the moment we moved in and Motherchild began to fill it up. She pushed the beauty right out with her imitation *Home and Garden* decor and thick stench of despair: dirty sheets and spoiled food.

She filled it with stage furniture. Rich brocades lined her bed, too fancy to use. New leather couches, that I didn't dare sit on for fear of ruining, filled the living room like some unlived-in scene from a magazine. Even my room was a parody, coated in cheetah prints and cluttered with antique wood, all too rich for a clumsy twelve-year-old to own. I spent most nights camped out in Motherchild's bed, waiting for her to slip from the sheets and wander the house. I refused to be blamed for what she did while sleepwalking. Just because she didn't remember moving the couch didn't mean that I had decided to rearrange the living room. Besides, I couldn't hear her from my room; couldn't hear if she was about to slip into the garage and drive through a wall.

Predictably, I sucked at being a mom. I was nothing like the other Virgin Mary you hear about, with patience and kindness and overall saintly disposition. All the damn sniffling and sobbing inspired in me were dreams of shoving a pillow over Motherchild's face. I could call it crib death! It'd look like an accident! But no, the cops would probably figure it out. Pity.

If I'd had just one bitty maternal bone, maybe I could have comforted her properly. But Motherchild's hand on my arm was enough to make me cringe. And there was no way I was going to wrap my arms around her bulk and shake her blubber with gentle pats. It just wasn't in me. The thought of it was enough to make my ribs twist, fighting to hold down a heave.

She noticed. It's hard not to notice when the person you hug will flinch away. It hurt her. Sometimes, when the tears welled up and enough time had passed since my last attempt to live up to Mary's example, and I had forgotten just how disgusting motherchildren were with their weird musty smells and leaky noses, I would try to act as a proper mom. My attempts at mothering mostly resulted in my shoulder getting soaked and my intestines attempting to squirm their way out so that I might use them to hang myself. But I tried.

Tried being the operative word; my skin still twitched like horse's flesh. I tried to say the right things, but my tongue tangled and only mumbles came out.

I tried to pat her shoulder, hand outstretched far from my body, but she wouldn't accept that. She always wanted more: sweet words, pleasant

smiles, shared tears, and worst of all, she wanted hugs. She'd pull me into her unwashed skin and fat arms and grip me 'til I thought I'd be smothered.

So I stopped. A real mom would have pushed through, would have patted their child on the back and dealt with the spit up and the stink of shit with a smile. A real mom would have managed to push their own issues aside and done whatever their child needed them to. But, like I said, I was a shitty mother. Motherchild got to cry without anyone's shoulders to soak it up; and she cried a lot.

She cried in the car when any love song in the world came on. She cried when commercials featured men. She cried when there was a woman on television. She cried when she remembered that dad had won the house in the divorce; his prize in exchange for me. She cried late at night, when she thought I slept, but who could sleep with those disgusting snuffling noises? She even cried when she fished into her purse and pulled out her yellow bottles that housed an assortment of candy colored pills, but only when she didn't take enough to forget who she was.

Sometimes, when we were out, Mom would talk about Motherchild. Out in the food courtyard of Alabama's only mall, her eyes were clear. She'd apologize for the thing's behavior, ask how I was holding up; while in public, she tried to let me be a kid again. But I was too out of practice to be her babe. Besides, I was a virgin mother, and virgin mothers must be strong. I was not going to admit it was too much, not when her eyes welled and all I wanted was silence. Not words, not apologies, just silence. Blame was stupid, better to leave it in the lost and found. Better to toss in a dumpster and let the trash silence its bawls.

By the time I got to fourteen, Motherchild cried less. She rarely got out of bed. She stared blankly into walls, chatted absently to blankets or the TV, and every so often would shake a few round tablets into her hand of various colors, washed down with a Coke. Not healthy, I know, but she did so love Coca-Cola; who was I to deny her? It's not like Dad ever had.

Illness is never easy, and Motherchild was a very colicky tot. Children aren't good with pain. But she tried to put on a brave face when we were out of the house.

When we were alone she screamed. I bruised my knuckles on a wall to keep from joining the ranks of child abusers everywhere. She screamed until I began to believe her words, believed that I didn't care, about anything or anyone. Screamed until I ran from her, and shook, and realized I'd forgotten how to cry. Screamed until I couldn't hear anything but her. Screamed until

my sink turned orange with washed blood, until my arms and legs were laced with scars. Screamed until my fifteenth birthday came and I ran, back to my father and his quiet, childless world.

I couldn't warn her. Anytime I tried to tell Motherchild I planned on moving back with Dad, my tongue grew thick and my limbs shook. Not only was I a shitty mom, but I was a coward to boot.

Motherchild might not have been the most observant child, but she wasn't blind—she noticed when my quick visit to Dad's turned into months. She called. I tried to steel myself for her sobs and begging. I tried to remember that if I went back to her I would someday push my trusty razor blade a bit too far, and I really didn't want to die.

But it wasn't Motherchild on the phone, it was Mom. It was my mom, and she knew just how sick Motherchild was making me, how damn tired I was—just like any new mother. Mom knew I was hardly fit to be a mother, and the best thing for everyone would be for me to go learn how to be a kid. Not that she said any of that.

Mom just said she'd never been so proud.

Bree Stallings

Jessica's Blanket

I met Jessica at an AIDS orphanage in Khayelitsha, a slum suburb of Cape Town, South Africa. On the way over there from The Ritz, our hotel for the last six days, talk on the bus from the other students was soft, muddled, and tinted with worry. Some were concerned about the potential exposure to tuberculosis from the children, others about accidentally spreading colds to the kids, worsening their already weak immune systems. One girl complained about not liking children and not wanting to participate at all; she was met without comment and a few audible sighs, to which she folded her arms and turned her body to the window.

I wasn't sure how I was feeling. Nauseous maybe, from the pimento cheese sandwich that my stomach rejected as breakfast, or maybe from the gravel roads we'd been on for over half an hour in a mega-bus, feeling each small rock like a jolt through my dehydrated body. And it was the kids, too. I didn't know what to expect.

Like all life-rattling moments, my memory is jumpy and time-warped. We stepped off the bus in a sluggish single-file. I remember breathing deeply, inhaling the dry dust of the roads and wondering how I would be able to leave this place in one, emotionally-stable piece.

My shaky legs were met with swarms of children, all laughing and jumping as they spilled out of the main entrance way. Thoughts of disease dissolved in the flood around my knees; I picked up a child in each arm.

On the left, a small child with open sores on her eyelids and forehead and an obviously dirty diaper. On the right, a bubbly child, with a radiating smile. She tousled my hair, throwing it up in the air and watching it fall with joy. She told me she was "this many," holding out her splayed palm, and her name was Jessica.

The keeper of the orphanageinstructed us to not worry about her Xhosa name, as she knew we'd be unable to pronounce the proper clicks.

With a wide-gapped smile, the large woman opened her arms and extended herself to us as "Momma."

Momma explained that the kids had probably never seen red hair before, had never touched a white person. The children looked and played with my nose ring like it was a precious artifact, examined delicately and from all angles. I found myself laughing wildly at everything they did.

Most of the children were obviously ill, some with birth defects like unclosed pupils or unformed facial features. One small child, held in one arm and bottle-fed by my professor, was almost two years old, and developmentally stunted. This was caused, Momma said, by being born from a mother late in her battle with AIDS. Mixed with the genes of an also unhealthy father, these children would likely not live past six or seven, would never have the opportunity to go to school, would never see the outside of the orphanage gates.

There were a few older children, though, two girls, maybe eleven or twelve, which prompted the question if all the children were sick. Momma said no, not all, but they were still greatly affected by the disease, which had wiped out nearly an entire generation of 30-somethings. The grandparents, if they had any, often could not afford the burden left to them and would hand them over to the orphanage, hoping they would get a better opportunity for education and healthcare. Usually, the children never knew anything about their original homes or families.

Originally, us students were to be on rotating shifts helping administer tuberculosis medicine, a sour tube taken orally that had the consistency and smell of milk of magnesia. The children hated it, and for the first time since we had arrived, resisted being held by us; squirmed down our laps and tried to wiggle out of their clothes to break free. Momma explained it made them sick to their stomachs, a hardship on already-ill children, but what could you do? You had to be preventative of what you could.

After that, we were supposed to do basic chores: washing windows, painting cabinets and mopping the common area. Momma saw the children having so much fun we thus, she had us play with them instead.

Always speaking through her wide-smile, she teared up. "I haven't heard so much laughter in such a long time."

I smiled back and thought, neither had I.

Jessica clung to me the entire three hours we were there. She swatted away the other children and then would turn back to me with a smile. I taught her how to take pictures, though she had to hold the camera upside down to be able to reach the button. Every time it flashed, she beamed.

Later, going through my pictures, I realized that most of them are of nothing; the blurry knees of adults and the warped smiles of other children. Mostly, they were light and color and movement. I thought, this must be what childhood looks like. I still cannot bring myself to delete any of the one hundred and thirty four pictures she took.

We slid, and twirled, and danced, and sang, and it was simple, but it was pure and happy. I cried, only once, when we gathered our things to leave, and she looked at me seriously and said, "Momma, no." The next few minutes were a blur of emotion, but I will never forget her small hands stretched through the gate and her twisted face screaming, "Momma, no!," as we pulled away from the orphanage. I held my hand against the glass until we left Cape Town.

I hated the next ride, four hours up the Garden Route, with a bus full of people sleeping and contented. I felt dismayed and confused and angry and strangely relieved. I tried to write, but words escaped me and my handwriting seemed foreign. I tried listening to music but nothing was of any interest. I spent most of the ride adjusting in my seat and staring out at the mountains that framed the window, wondering if any of the children would ever see the beauty of their homeland.

As night set gently upon the rolling hills of the Lowveld, a sense of clarity came to me. I thought of the children on the streets, the orphans, and of Momma. How could I make that connection a part of my life—that joy and that pain? Both emotions held hands and poured down in buckets, filling my insides with a bittersweet twang.

I had learned in Astronomy that there were different constellations visible on this hemisphere. I looked up at a sky I had never seen, and might never see again. I closed my eyes, hard, trying to ingrain the stars under my eyelids, to keep close.

It's hard to explain, a different view of the sky like that. I'd lived my life under a sheet of speckled white dots like a bleached blanket draped over our clear horizons. In South Africa, I felt much smaller than ever before:here, the stars had a distance.The sky was a crisp black, the stars were not speckled but splashed, each twinkling like a note in a massive song. I imagined the edge of the universe, the stars growing gradually smaller until no longer visible to me anymore, but not stopping there.

How could I help them? Was I too Americanized, too jaded, to realize the true solution of these issues? I wasn't sure Jessica or any of the other children's lives could be touched by a GAP RED campaign shirt, or by a red ribbon I

bought that sat as a bookmark in an old poetry anthology, any more than by shiny money that sat on the bottom of wishing wells. They were undoubtably affected by their environments, by the discouraging conditions that surrounded them. It was a literal visualization of the epidemic that plagued their lives.

I'd often thought of life as a blanket: each soul, a thread, small and at times indeterminable, yet necessary to the structure upon which we depend. Each of us touching and affecting each other, and where our threads end, something else begins.

I thought of a Zulu proverb we had been taught earlier in the week: "mouto-ce-mouto ca-bahtu." You are only alive through other people. The universal blanket.

Riding through the mountains, the thought caught fire in my head. What if part of my blanket was broken—ripped out? From the American perspective, we were literally thousands of miles away from the "hole." We could hear about it, see live-action news stories covering the devastation of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, but until we could step into the gap and exposeed our malleable hearts to the inevitable beating, there would be no lasting effect.

Down here, it was blindingly obvious what had been ripped away—all the things that kept me secure were broken off, and the frayed pieces stay frayed. Young parents, buried with the death sentence of their children. Grandparents leaving work to raise their grandchildren, or the orphans that weren't worth the smaller ration of food, the risk of losing a house, a job.

Here the blanket was broken, each pieced frayed from the abrupt cut of death, pulled and unraveling behind it. Here, the option was to watch the demise of an entire people, knowing that, eventually, it would unravel all of us, unless we could repair it while there was time, strength and resources from far away.

As much as I was attached to my metaphor, South Africa was not a blanket—these were lives. Some were unmoved by the efforts of other people. Some were gone before answers could be found. Some slipped below the public eye, an unseen life.

I think of Jessica. I hope she is not sick, that I will see her again. I hope she will remember me. I pray to anyone that I think will listen. But I am still troubled that no matter how hard I squeeze my eyes, or how clearly I feel the cool, brisk night and the clarity of my mind in that moment, I can't remember what the sky looks like from South Africa; from the eyes of a nation that fought through apartheid, from a generation that fights through rampant disease. From the eyes of a little girl who is ignorantly, blissfully, veiled in hope and joy.

ART

Together

Alli Rybak

Cup of Tea

Kat Schweitzer

Shadows

Alli Rybak

Fire

Elli McGuire

Outdoor Seating

Gabriella Santander

Yellow

Elli McGuire

Dock

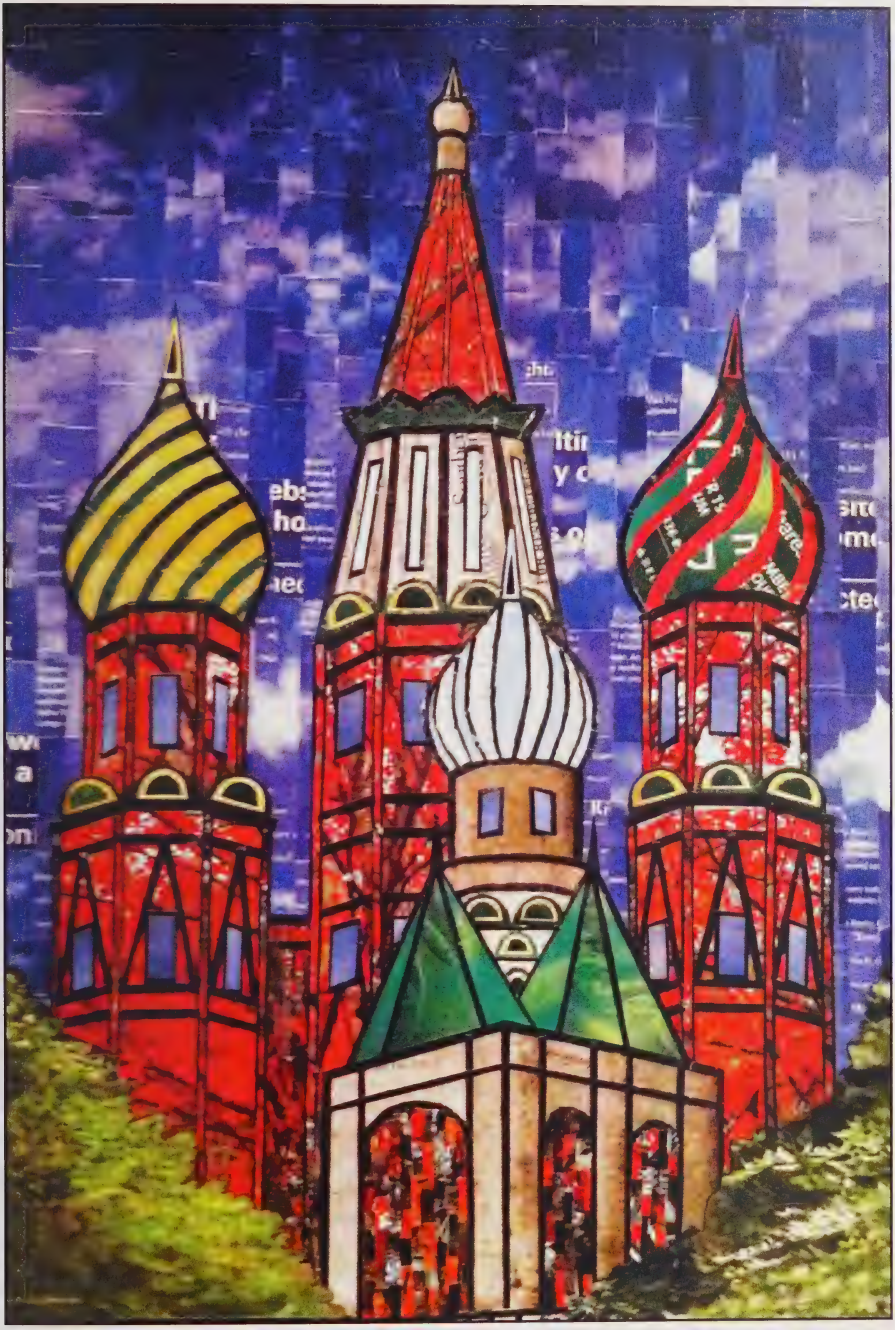
Matthew Collen

Trifles of Affection

Emma Rainear

Beautiful Little Fool

Dierdre Ryan



St. Basil's Cathedral

Ashley Etheridge

Fountain of Youth

Sarah Rose

Lace Stars and Peonies

Sarah Schwister

Rusted Gate

Shakeela Mays

The Grapes of Wrath

David Barnes

All That's Green is Purple

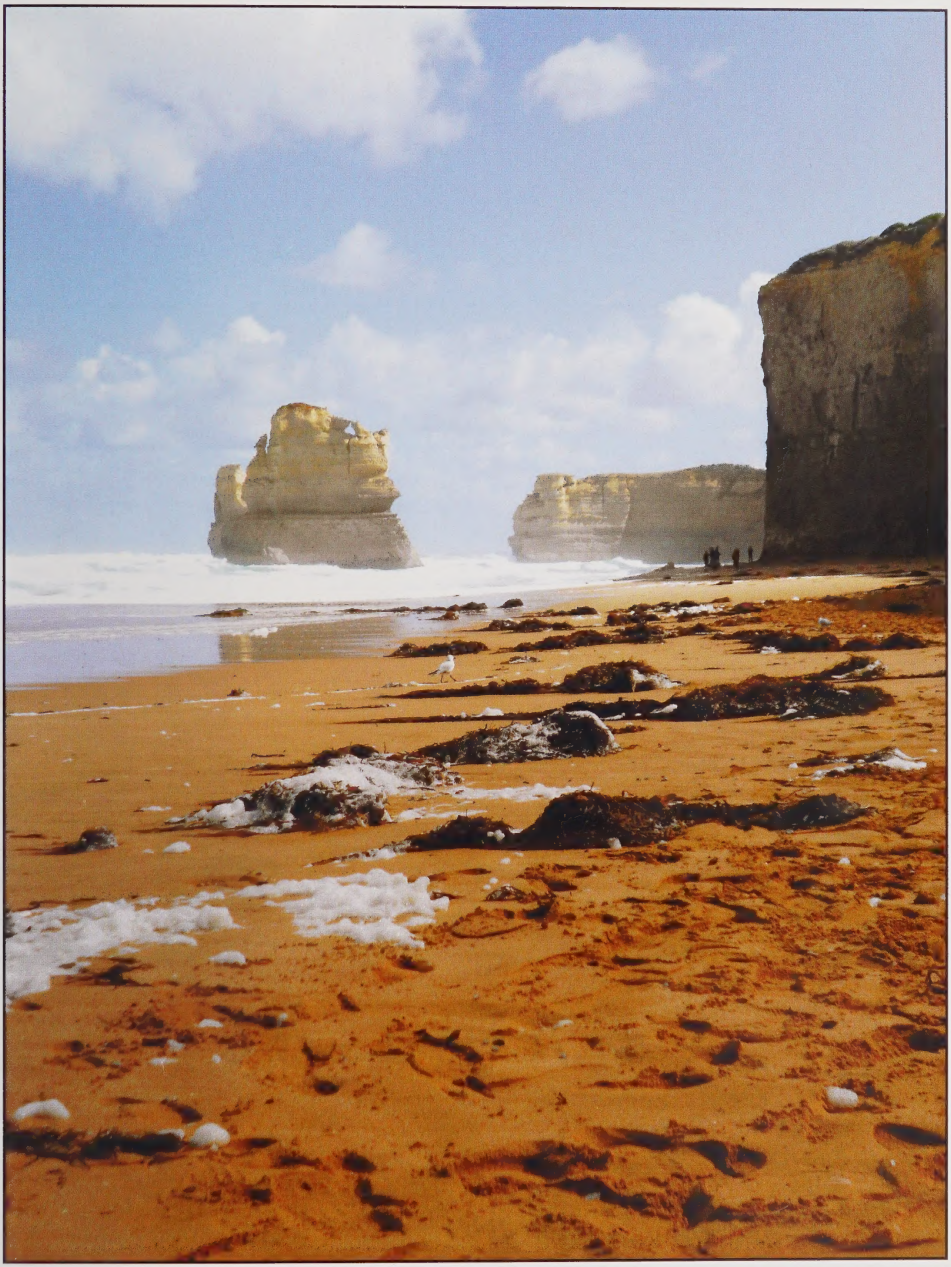
Samantha Thompkins

Deadly Deserts

Nicole Bearden

Boating

Alina Labrador



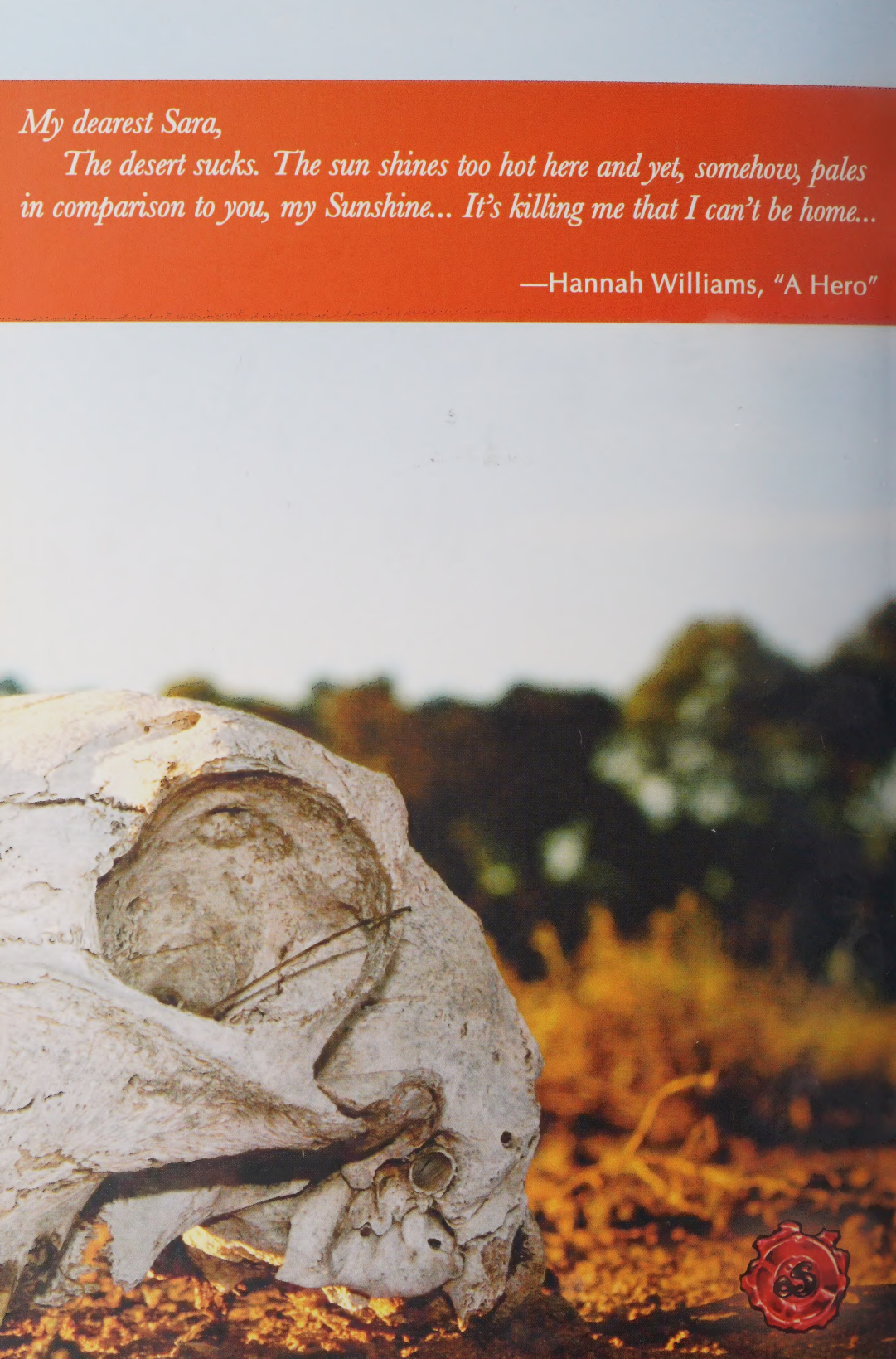
Beauty Beyond the Sand

Nicole Bearden

Signs

Elli McGuire

My dearest Sara,

The desert sucks. The sun shines too hot here and yet, somehow, pales in comparison to you, my Sunshine... It's killing me that I can't be home...

—Hannah Williams, "A Hero"